

# *cine*ACTION



## FRAMING THE FAMILY

Number 30 1992

## *cine***ACTION**

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*CineAction* is published three times a year by the CineAction collective. Single copy \$7  
Subscriptions:  
Canada and U.S.: 3 issues/\$18 (individual)  
3 issues/\$35 (institutions);  
overseas add \$15

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This issue was assisted by grants from the Writing and Publication Section of the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council.

Stills from: Cinematèque Ontario, Museum of Modern Art Stills Archive, and the British Film Institute.

*CineAction* is owned and operated by CineAction, a collective for the advancement of film studies. CineAction is a non-profit organization.

ISSN 0826-9866  
Printed and bound in Canada

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In a now famous remark, Margaret Thatcher noted that "there is no such thing as society, there are individual men and women and there are families." Thatcher's elision of society, or more to the point, the State, in favour of autonomous individuals and families reflects in a very precise way the function of the Family as an ideology and an institution within post-industrial nations. The Family serves at once to embody the State and to make it invisible.

The relation between Family ideology, nationhood, and State cohesion was nowhere more visible than in Canada's failed constitutional accord. Marketed solely on the basis of social unity and national identity, the accord was couched in the most matrimonial of campaigns: "Say Yes to Canada." The attempt to woo the different populations of Canada was done without recourse to those political and economic 'details' that would define the union. The ideology of the Family and of the Nation are, in effect, one and the same: separating social/economic cohesion from State politics, transforming nation into cultural identity, and social union into a private affair of the heart.

The U.S. presidential campaign relied on similar if not more blatant strategies. Here, the dysfunctional family—an invocation that demonstrates the very instrumental nature of the family—was the root of all evil (including *Murphy Brown* and *The Simpsons*). The broken home (the

welfare family, that is, single mothers) is held responsible for a deteriorating social fabric, for the escalation in violent crimes, and in a curious inversion, for the economic crisis. Both the Republicans and the Democrats promised to 'rebuild' the Family (i.e. the American Dream) by bringing Dad back into the picture. Indeed, the Clintons were the TV family *par excellence*. And though Bill had 'strayed', he was secure in his new found family image, an image which recalled the original TV family, the Kennedys.

Yet the mythology of the Family within capitalist culture has always relied on the absence of the father—lest we forget that image of images: Madonna and child. "[F]ather was absent", Judith Williamson underlines, "long before he had to hold the camera." (*Consuming Passions* [London: Marion Boyars, 1988: 177]) The representation of the Family has always served to mask the processes of production, whether this be the patriarchal design or women's labour within it. The idealized representation of the Family unit as white, middle class, and completely autonomous has served to link family and state in an ideological embrace; one that enforces the Law of the (always absent) Father, assuring heterosexuality (i.e. procreation and woman's place), regulating leisure time (mostly through TV), and fostering the ideology of consumption. Like the dysfunctional family, the 'nuclear' family reflects the

instrumentalization of social relations; it reflects the way difference is flattened, whitened and closed in on itself—an atomization created and sustained through Capital. Most crucially, the image of the nuclear family, always linked to reproductive technologies (the home camera, whether still, film, or video) precisely to sustain itself, reflects an ideological configuration that is impervious to change.

It is not surprising, given the movement of global capital, that the Family has emerged as the choice signifier for unity and as a container for difference, dissent, and violence, always regulated to the private disempowered sphere of women and their children. This issue of *Cineaction* is dedicated to investigating the complex representations of the Family, and the intricate relations (psychoanalytic and economic) within families as these have appeared in mainstream and oppositional media. The Family, for us, extends far beyond the confines of the private sphere—in fact, the family has managed to privatize the domestic sphere. The essays gathered here explore not only how this Family has functioned through representation, but also how its alternatives have been imaged. They investigate a frame that has made itself invisible.

JANINE MARCHESSAULT  
SUSAN MORRISON



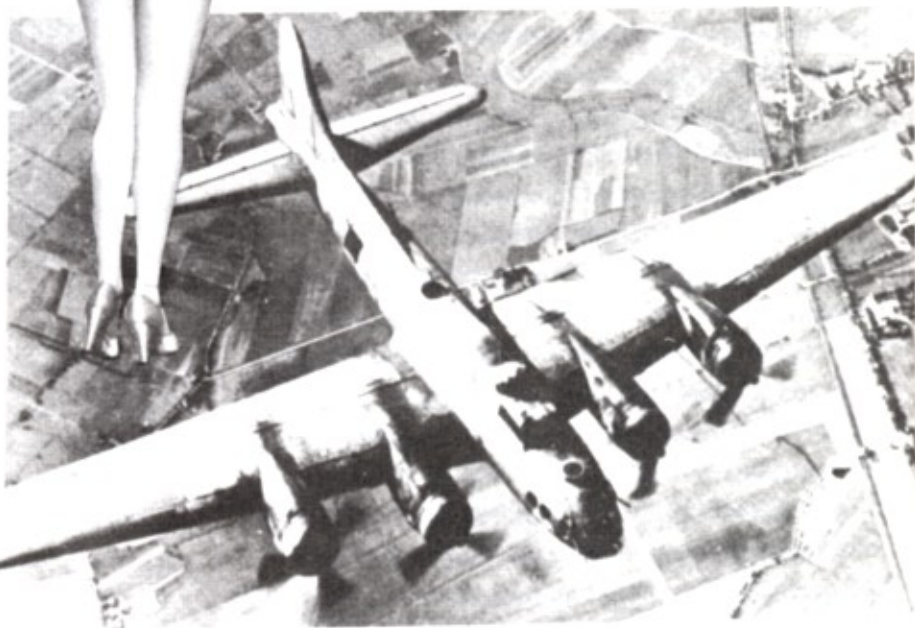
# Battle Stations

WAR, MEMORY AND THE FAMILY

I could identify B-29 bombers before I could identify automobiles. I can still instantly recognize their rounded shape and glassy noses, bomb bay doors opening to rain fire on Japan. Sitting in the family room in the house in Portland Oregon, watching war movies with Dad, I learned how the bombardier found his target, what the bombs looked like exploding on the ground, how the pilot found his way back to the aircraft carrier. Bombers were often named after women, wives and sweethearts: Dad's B-29 had the title of a popular Korean war song "Always in Love with Amy" painted on the side and teeth painted under the windows on the nose. Amy is my mother.



by Deborah Root



*The Memphis Belle, 1944*  
TOP: Betty Grable

In our family, war was always World War Two, and World War Two was always the Pacific Theatre; the war in Europe never seemed to have the intensity of the Pacific war, despite the efforts of D-Day narratives. The Pacific war, although long past, was alive; the aircraft carriers, the bombing raids, the kamikaze pilots screaming into the flames. My Air Force and Navy relatives all fought in the Pacific, and Amy would remind us over and over again that the Oregon coast had been shelled. Family memories were remarked and recalled by the movie images on television: giant, sweaty faces filling the screen, planes being shot down, crisp Navy uniforms, bodies blown to bits amidst clouds of smoke, intense man-to-man encounters where everything seemed to be at stake. The only Japanese faces are the kamikaze pilots.

We would sit side by side and watch war movies and my father would brood, occasionally turning to me and saying in an expressionless voice, "Debbie, this is war." This was family time; Amy would choke up over Pearl Harbor and my dad would denigrate her emotion, her trembling voice; he had seen the real thing, and passed along the experience to us through the movies. Unlike my mother, he managed to flatten the emotion out of his war voice. We understood that my mother was being childish in assuming that the war had any meaning for her personally, particularly in so far as she was the one who demonstrated emotion. My mother's war, with her father in constant danger on the aircraft carrier, the women of the family huddling around the radio, the line of eyebrow pencil on the back of the leg, had by the 50s and 60s come to be of little interest or importance. Even her name on the B-29 gave her no right to the war. It was not the real thing, which was machines and people getting killed.

Images from World War Two are burned into my brain and bound up with my sense of the family, or at least of my family: the men go off to fight, come home and have a hard time adjusting to the demands of everyday life. My dad enlisted towards the end of World War Two, and mostly dropped bombs on Korea, but it is the World War Two images that defined war in those pre-MASH days. It wasn't just that peacetime life lacked intensity, it was that the experiences of war defined peacetime, and peacetime was measured against war: it was in war that you (qua male) learned what was important, what mattered, and it sure as hell wasn't family life or cutting crabgrass. This came through in the movies, where the rigors of combat seemed to pre-empt concerns with protocol; the real action was in the encounters with other men that determined if one would live or die. My father wasn't particularly happy with his life in Portland for, I think, a range of reasons, but it was always possible to coax him into good humour by questioning him about the war. Question and answer took the form of a recital of proper names — Bataan, Corregidor, Guadalcanal — that was framed and illustrated by movies with similar titles. War movies were the tenuous glue that held us together, because they were something to talk about, and something that for reasons I never understood would soothe my father. We could connect with my father through his experience in the Pacific, or rather his imaginary experi-

ence in the Pacific (as the substitute for Korea), and we could imagine ourselves to be of one mind as we watched intently, reliving the experience at the centre of the home.

But how do war movies construct and regulate the American nuclear family? For a white family such as ours, there was an immediacy to the images in the films because the actors looked and talked like men we knew. However obliquely in a war context, the values of the American way as articulated through the experience of men at war were addressed more or less directly to us, through actors such as Spencer Tracy in *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944). As Althusser would have it, we (mis)recognized ourselves in the movies, and, for us, the movies reinforced the notion that the American story is a white story and that bad behaviour among well brought up white men is an aberration. Indeed, the bad behaviour itself often had a didactic function: in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) the harshness of John Wayne's sergeant character is necessary to discipline the men and prepare them for combat. As (white) women watching these movies, we learned to trust the men in charge, which is to say the officers.

The movies provided lessons in deportment for the white middle class: Navy uniforms, buddies helping buddies, officers acting responsibly all function to inform us that the American project has a point, that it is being conducted properly, that white guys can work together to save the world. It was young white men who displayed honour and patriotic courage in the stories of the movies; and the movies also contained cautionary tales of those who have failed to behave honourably, articulated in such a way that never put the system itself into question. We all know that white male honour has been something of a fiction, to say the least, but the war movies functioned to preserve and maintain this myth, which in turn served to stand for the American Way itself. The war narratives didn't need actually to show contented middle class families back in the USA (although some did); these were referred to through the agenda of World War Two itself to preserve 'democracy.'

So the war became not only a male story (which means that my mother's experience had to be belittled, and her complicities elided), it was presented as a white story, which meant that other experiences of the war had to be excluded. Except in rare instances, World War Two movies do not show brown and black faces: an exception, *The Ira Hayes Story*, which features Tony Curtis playing the Navajo marine at Iwo Jima, presents Hayes' wartime experience as a peacetime tragedy. Certainly the war in the Pacific drew upon and manifested long-standing anti-Asian prejudices, which in turn informed Korea and Vietnam, and made it possible for my father and me to subsume Korea under World War Two heroics. Films about the European war are filled with Nazis, and the repetition of evil German officers in SS uniforms has rendered Nazi Germany familiar, if ambivalent, territory (in more ways than one, perhaps, as the Allied governments had initially been quite sympathetic to fascism; witness the Spanish civil war). We are all able to do fake German accents (ve haff vays...). In the Pacific war stories, the Japanese are malevolent but generalized, and much less of a known factor, which makes it possible for the



*Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo*, Mervyn LeRoy, 1944

narratives to focus on Americans dealing with Americans.

What is the lesson of the Pacific movies? That the American project can be universalized, that everyone has the same agenda, to make the rest of the world familiar, which is to say, to make it part of American territory, to bring it under American purview, under the direction of officers. But war films also reinforce the notion that it is necessary for men to leave the family and go elsewhere to become men (which you also see in 'countercultural' films like *Easy Rider* (1969): nothing happens in the family; real life takes place outside the home).

The real story of America, according to the movies, was a story of white male honour demonstrating itself and playing itself out in a way that was displaced from American territory proper. Why was this dislocation from American territory necessary? Patriotic games of honour have always been played out through the conquest of territory, through the moving outward, outside of spatial confinements, and outside of the family. In these films, the family is constructed as a site of male confinement, and the romantic subplots generally come up as a conflict between women, who stand for the familial, and patriotic duty. White men construct themselves as such through their relations with the state, and through living out fantasies of Manifest Destiny. In this way World War Two movies link up with Westerns, and is one reason John Wayne was popular both as an Indian fighter and a World War Two soldier. World War Two has



*Sands of Iwo Jima*, Allan Dwan, 1944

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always been presented as an honourable war because of the nature of the enemy and a great deal of effort has been spent in ensuring the enemy appears as different as possible from the Allied forces. And bomber pilots in the Pacific could be glamorized to a greater extent than infantry because the 'fly-boys' never had to get their hands dirty, which is to say, they never had to see what was happening on the ground. The smart leather jackets and white silk scarves reinforced the aristocratic nature of their endeavour.

Of course I wanted to be a bomber pilot, but there was the slight problem of gender which we all politely ignored in the family setting, at least at that time. The crisply dressed Navy nurses never had the same stylishness of the leather-jacketed pilots, and the role of the other women in the movies (often prostitutes encountered during 'r&r,' I realize now) was never clear. The women in the films never seemed real, and I think it is no accident that, although battle images remain vivid in my mind, I cannot recall romances, although these were present in many of the films. Films such as *Battle Cry* (1955), *Jungle Patrol* (1948) and *The Fighting Seabees* (1944) all combined love and war, but the love stories seemed to have little to do with the real action of the narratives. The B-girls were a source of ambivalence: I remember photographs of my dad in Japanese geisha houses, and when Amy looked at these her mouth tightened. Later on in pre-adolescence I became obsessed with American war atrocities, especially Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and this fascination had as much to do with coming into gender as with a recognition that something was wrong with the story that we were seeing in the war movies.

Movies feed into memory: Amy tells me that men of her generation continue to talk constantly of the glory days of the war, although I wonder if the way they talk amongst themselves is different from the way they talk when women are present. It was a time without women, without family, a time in their lives that seemed exciting and meaningful. Amy says that it was impossible for these men to generate interest in their lives on their own, so the war had to come along to give them something to talk about. When that failed, they began to make up stories. I think it is not surprising that Dad began to embellish his war experience to make the events of war even more personal. Some of the embellishments were bizarre: my father solemnly told me that he had jumped over the Great Wall of China chasing the Japanese into Manchuria, and he showed me a piece of the wall to prove it.

The movies structured memory, until, for some, memory became impossible. After World War Two, my grandfather used to set up the projector in the living room and run footage of the sea battles he was in. How was it possible for him to relive these memories? The clattering, blasting, whistling noises, the confusion and the dying were all real, yet it was all occurring on film in a darkened living room in Tacoma, Washington. Years later, my grandfather, haunted by the spirits of the dead, began to have nightmares about the war, and it became impossible for him to watch movies that had anything to do with World War Two, or indeed with any war. And my grandmother had always whispered

that the war had transformed his personality.

Later, when I began to watch Japanese films about the war, the images seemed the same as in American movies, despite the fact that these films were often explicitly anti-war; the faces and uniforms were merely transposed. Some differences in protocol were noticeable, for instance, in Kobayashi's *The Human Condition* (1958-61), the Japanese officers seemed to shout more at the men than in American films. But in Ichikawa's *Fires on the Plain* (1959), it was now Japanese soldiers who sweated and grimaced and tried to survive in the Phillipine landscape, men interacting with men in desperate wartime conditions.

Differences and similarities exist between World War Two movies and Vietnam movies, and there have been efforts to infuse some of the latter with the heroism of the former, but it didn't take, despite John Wayne in *Green Berets* (1968). Certainly in the familial sphere, Vietnam was too divisive. I do remember my father informing me in low tones that he had heard of people like the Kurtz character in *Apocalypse Now*, although he hadn't personally met the type. By Vietnam, it was taken for granted that many of the military types were psychos, whereas in World War Two and Korea this was elided and discussed in whispers. There seems to be an attempt on the part of the war image industry to recover the family in the Gulf war, with stories of family scenes and tragedies playing again and again on our television screens as a substitute for combat footage. Whereas in World War Two films the war elided the family, today the display of the family conceals and glamorizes the nature of the American project.

We've always known war is a man's game, at least the way war is presented in mainstream American cinema. The names of my mother and other women painted on B-29s were meant to suggest that the war was being fought for them, in their names, as it were. The men referred to women back home and the war narratives sometimes referred to Stateside families, but in a way that reinforced their displacement from the wartime experience: women function as a pretext for men's business. I asked Amy how she felt having her name on the side of a bomber, and she told me that, at the time, she was pleased and flattered at the recognition. It was like being a pin-up girl, or the image of Rita Hayworth decorating the bomb that devastated Nagasaki. Amy spoke of visiting my grandfather's aircraft carrier when she was sixteen and having 3000 men whistle at her, and again, felt no ambivalence, which, in a way, is as it should be as it had nothing to do with her at all.

And, of course, the end of the story is predictable: Dad was not always in love with Amy, and over the years became more and more angry and unhappy until Amy finally divorced him and took us north. The post-war dream of the white middle class could not be sustained after the fifties; and the accumulation of goods could never be as satisfying as riding around in B-29s blowing people up.

As for me, the images remain. Crossing by ferry to the Toronto Islands a small plane flew low above us. My first reaction was to want to seize an anti-aircraft gun and blow it out of the sky. And when *Midway* (1976) came on late-night TV recently, I wish I could say I didn't watch it avidly.

## A black and white photograph of a group of nine people, likely a family, posing outdoors. They are dressed in early 20th-century attire, including hats and coats. A young child is seated in the foreground, and a man stands to the right. A suitcase in the foreground is labeled "H. KAWAMURA".

by Kirsten Emiko McAllister

The nation, Benedict Anderson states, is an "imagined political community." He argues that it is diametrically opposed to the *ancien régime* in that, "...regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail...the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship."<sup>1</sup> But as the paradox of America's melting pot ideology demonstrates, the representation of this 'deep horizontal comradeship' has its cracks. Certain racially defined groups are represented as lumps that refuse to melt down. In particular, despite the fact that there have been over four generations of Asian Americans in the United States, they remain essentially *Asian* in Hollywood. So, for example, in mainstream films, rather than seeing the contemporary Asian American family living in suburbia with their station wagon and daily dose of TV, we encounter the ruthless Hong Kong gang member, the loyal self-sacrificing servant and the deadly Oriental orchid, to mention only a few of the common caricatures.

The fact that ideological work is expended to actively imagine them as *Asian* rather than American suggests that these caricatures are more than just cracks in the 'deep horizontal comradeship.' This article will argue that the portrayal of people of Asian descent as *essentially Asian* situates them symbolically outside the "imagined political community" of the United States. Put another way, I will argue that the cracks are integral to America's structural design: the cultural construction of racial difference is key to the construction of the American nation.

Underlying my examination is the concept of the 'Other' based on the work of Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Edward Said and later developed by Homi Bhabha and Ashis Nandy.<sup>2</sup> This concept is useful because it offers an analysis that goes beyond naive realism, of simply identifying stereotypes as 'good' or 'bad.' It situates signification in the context of relations of domination. Within this theoretical framework, it is not only argued that the subjugated are signified in negative terms but as well, in binary opposition to their subjugators. For example, if the subjugators are rational, then the subjugated are irrational; if the subjugators are honest, the subjugated are dishonest and so on. In addition, the subjugated are represented as desirable and dangerous — a threat that needs to be contained or destroyed.<sup>3</sup> Thus not only do the subjugators construct their 'superior' identity from this semiotic relationship, but as well, it works to justify their domination of the subjugated.

This article will focus in particular on the manner in which people of Japanese and Chinese descent are imagined/imagined as Other in mainstream American cinema. Much ground work is needed to develop an analysis of the construction of the *Asian* in cinema. As Richard Fung suggests,<sup>4</sup> most theorizations of "race" are based on African American and Black British experiences.<sup>5</sup> The theorization of the Other is also developed for a specific context: colonization. In order to understand how the Asian is Other to America, it is necessary to refer to the historical and political specificities of their experiences such as their relations to the U.S. state; relations with other 'minority' groups; international relations between China, Japan and the U.S.; histories of immigration, labour and community development; events such as the internment of Japanese Americans, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the bombing of Hiroshima and the massacre at Tianamen Square. Without reference to historical and political specificity, a semiotic analysis is in danger of reducing all representations of "race" to a simple set of binary oppositions. Left out would be the fact that ideological work is required to maintain this binary opposition. While attempting to cast history in its own mold — in order to remain credible, dominant culture must draw from actual events and struggle to contain its own contradictions. This article is an effort towards filling out the specificities of America's imaginings.

## OUTSIDE AMERICA

In Hollywood cinema, *Chinatown* is represented as a cyst of/from the old country that threatens to infect American ideals. As such it is placed outside of history and outside of America. It is outside of history, specifically Modern notions

of history as progress, because it is represented as unchanging. Whereas America's 'Founding Fathers' were determined to start a new nation and forge a new history free from the corruption and superstitions of old Europe, the inhabitants of *Chinatown* still bow to "one thousand years" of beliefs and traditions, retaining their connections to ancient regimes from the old country.<sup>6</sup>

*Chinatown* is imagined as outside of America because it is a world unto itself, outside the reach of, and indecipherable to, American law. It is ruled by fear, threats and brute force; ancient family ties and loyalty to clans predominate. In *The Year of the Dragon* (Michael Cimino, 1985), *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (Mark Lester, 1991), *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) and *China Girl* (Abel Ferrara, 1987), *Chinatown* is the site of virulent violence. The white police investigating this bizarre brand of brutality often suspect that the accompanying ritualistic signs indicate a larger scheme, but their signification eludes them. *Chinatown* represents not just the threat of the *Asian* as the unknown Other, but the illogic and corruption of old regimes against which America was founded: the snake in The Garden.

Violence in *Chinatown* often takes a special form: ancient

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso, 1983/89, p. 15-16. Anderson argues later in his book that while nationalism is not exempt from racism, racism has its roots in "...claims to divinity among rulers and to 'blue' or 'white' blood and 'breeding' among aristocracies..." not in the nation. See p. 136-137.

2. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, New York: Grove Press, 1952/68; Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, New York: The Orion Press, 1957/1965; Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979; Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question," *Screen*, V. 24, #6, 1983; Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983/1990.

3. As implied, this theory draws from psychoanalysis.

4. See Richard Fung, "Multiculturalism Reconsidered" in *Yellow Peril Reconsidered Catalogue*, Vancouver: On the Edge, 1990, p. 17-19.

5. For example, from Britain's Cultural Studies School at Birmingham University, there is Paul Gilroy's book, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, London: Hutchinson, 1987; in the 1988, V. 4, #29 issue of *Screen* on "race," seven of the eleven articles focus on the representation of African Americans and Black British with only one on the representation of Asian British; from the United States there is the widely appreciated work of bell hooks' work such as *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990, and so on. My point is not that work on Asian representation has been in any way 'marginalized.' Rather, it is that Asian Canadians/Americans have a lot of researching, producing and theorizing to do in order to develop a similar level analysis.

6. James W. Carey and John J. Quirk, "The Mythos of the Electronic Revolution," *The American Scholar*, V. 39, #1, Spring 1970, Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in the 19th Century America*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979/80, p. 223-227, p. 3-15. Also it is interesting to speculate how a Canadian reading of the Asian's connection to his/her homeland might differ from an American reading, especially in the context of Arthur Kroker's article, "The Canadian Discourse" where he describes Canada as "...neither the American way or the European way, but an oppositional culture trapped midway between economy and history...between empire (power) and culture (history)" (*Technology and the Canadian Mind*, Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984, p. 13 & 15.) For an interesting discussion of this topic see Jose Arroyo, "Ideology and Apparatus: the Uses of the Madison School of Pragmatics," paper given at the 1991 Annual Films Studies Ass. of Canada, forthcoming in *CineAction*.



Ridley Scott's *Black Rain*

cunning and corruption are married to state-of-the-art technology — big guns, bombs, hidden traps. It is a sinister image overlain with a collective memory of Vietnam. Through this construction, different cultural and national groups are conflated. Koreans, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Japanese function as interchangeable signs meaning the *Asian*. This is an example of the way in which specific racial stereotypes are constructed with reference to other racially defined groups.<sup>7</sup> The *Asian* becomes a vehicle that amasses particular issues and symbols circulating in America's historical and contemporary consciousness. So, for example, the Chinese in Hollywood, rather than signifying a specific community, becomes a flexible image that can be loaded

with changing national anxieties. This makes it possible for this image to not only signify the importation of ancient Chinese corruption, but also to connote *Vietnam*.

#### ASIAN PROTOTYPES

The Asian prototype that most typically inhabits *Chinatown* is exotic and menacing; for example, the Asian flower whose beauty draws the protagonist into the corruption of *Chinatown*. In *The Year of the Dragon*, the allure of Tracy, the Chinese and Japanese<sup>8</sup> American female, lures Stanley, the white male protagonist, to a murder case in *Chinatown*. Once hooked, he pursues her into the dangers of *Chinatown*'s underworld, in spite of his hatred of Asians, the advice of his best friend and his attempts to cling to his dedicated wife.

Another prototype is the knife flicking gang member. One can see him (sometimes her) running around within frenzied mobs in *The Year of the Dragon*, *China Girl*, *Black Rain* (Ridley Scott, 1989) and *Big Trouble in Little China* (John Carpenter, 1986). The Asian gang member is conflated with motifs of the new immigrant and youth. Both references suggest the Asian gang member remains irresponsible, an undeveloped adult/citizen lacking reason and judgment. This makes them prime candidates for exploitation by corrupt "community leaders." It also implies that they have only the most primitive sense of American ethics: s/he will kill without hesitation and when backs are turned, transgressing at least two of America's key codes of honour. Bereft of ethics, the gang member is dehumanized, reduced to a vehicle for violence.

There is also the Chinese tong leader or Japanese daimyo, the diabolical overlord who pulls the strings behind every shadow of corruption. These old guys have international connections in drugs and big money and affiliations with Italian mafia (*Black Rain*, *China Girl* and *The Year of the Dragon*). In *The Year of the Dragon*, they even control military movements overseas. They are the Yellow Peril incarnate, scheming to take over America.

Not all Asians in Hollywood are sinister or exotic. The assimilated Asian American, most often represented as male, is a case in point. He wears glasses and is well meaning, a sensitive but basically wimpy guy. While seemingly good fodder for liberal America's quota of 'positive media images,' he essentially represents the emasculated male. In *The Year of the Dragon*, the Chinese underworld kills one of these nice guys, underlining the evilness which the rather uncouth white protagonist struggles against.<sup>9</sup> There are few assimilated Asian females. But usually, even these possess that fatal brand of beauty which unfailingly draws white men into the evil networks of their breed.

While the assimilated *Asian* is acceptably non-threatening, the best *Asian* still remains the subservient *Asian*. S/he retains all the commendable Asian qualities of wisdom and loyalty. Domesticated as a loyal servant/buddy (*Chinatown*, *Showdown in Little Tokyo*), as a martial arts expert recruited to the hero's cause (Bruce Lee films, the *Karate Kid* series) or as a wise sage devoted to the enlightenment of the hero/heroine (the Chinese herbalist in *Alice* (Woody Allen, 1991) the white protagonist can count on their never failing 'duty until death' motto.

These stereotypes emphasize that Asians are not individuals. They are part of and tied to a family or clan. Thus when an outsider deals with one, s/he is also taking on an invisible network. This is a world where unrelated people call each other "cousin." A world where family loyalty creeps into the community and oozes its way overseas to knot with ancient laws and epidemic corruption. For example, in *China Girl*, when the male protagonist begins to pursue the virginal heroine, little does he realize that he also has to face her protective brother, his gang of Hong Kong thugs, and all the loyalties and laws that bind them to the will of the group.

Paradoxically, even the quality that makes Asians good servants, their self-sacrificing loyalty, is what also makes them dangerous enemies. In both instances, loyalty arises from the fact that they cannot think as individuals. Instead they obey their superiors and the dictates of tradition. Unable to think as individuals, it is impossible for them to become Americans.

Assimilation via interracial marriage is also denied. Through the institution of marriage, individuals become integrated into society as full-fledged citizens, producing children, owning property, and basically reproducing social institutions.<sup>10</sup> But in Hollywood interracial love never reaches the perfect happy ending of the 'love story': consummation in socially sanctioned matrimony. In *China Girl* interracial love ends in the violent death of the lovers. In *The Year of the Dragon* it can only occur between two outcasts: an ill-adjusted Vietnam vet and a hybrid, a Japanese/Chinese American journalist with American values. The marriage in *Come See the Paradise* (Alan Parker, 1990) remains outside the mainstream, isolated on a farm in the safety of the extended Japanese American family.

Most Hollywood Films about Asians are about Asians in Japan, Hong Kong, China or Vietnam. Wherever they are placed, overseas or in *Chinatown* they are for the most part absent from the official history of the United States. The role Asian Americans had/have in building the nation remains unacknowledged. When remembered, it is as derogatory stereotypes: recall the screaming, hysterical cook in *The Virginian* (Victor Fleming, 1930). Even in *Come See the Paradise*, supposedly about the internment of Japanese Americans, the narrative structure denies them subjectivity. Japanese American history is reduced to an interesting backdrop for the development of the white heterosexual male hero.<sup>11</sup> Events of the war, union struggles and the

7. As well as other oppressed groups, such as women. For example, Asian males are often presented as de-masculinized if not emasculated. In *The Year of the Dragon*, Joe, the evil Tong leader, is presented as a dandy. He is effeminate in his careful mannerisms, slim youthful build, stylish attention to dress, androgynous features and hair style. This makes his violent, close to militaristic pursuit and eventual conquest by Stanley, the white male protagonist/former Vietnam vet seem all the more desirable. Stanley's lustful hunt for Joe is heightened by the parallel made to Stanley's sexual pursuit of Tracy, the Asian American reporter who is an almost mirror image of Joe.

8. The fact that she is of Chinese and Japanese descent functions on a number of levels: her specificity is blurred and she becomes insinuated as the diabolical Asian enemy who are, as Harry describes them, "all the



Alan Parker's *Come See the Paradise*

same"; her hybrid ancestry also refers to other women of mixed Asian and Caucasian descent in Hollywood cinema who are signified as 'without a nation.' Without a nation, in some cases they have no identity and thus no moral strength (the Chinese/British "Poppy" in *The Shanghai Gesture*, Joseph von Sternberg, 1941) or in other cases, are pulled into the 'higher' American cause (*Blood on the Sun*, Frank Lloyd, 1945).

9. Justifying his not so liberal racism.

10. Note that integration into the mainstream of society through marriage is also denied to gays and lesbians.

11. Sadly the independent American production, *A Thousand Pieces of Gold* (Nancy Kelly, 1990), an independent feature about a Chinese woman who immigrated to the Wild West, reproduces the same narrative structure.

internment function mainly as devices to keep the protagonist tragically separated from his Japanese American wife. This almost impossible (i.e., interracial) relationship is driven by a purely sexual urge: the main objective seems to be a fleshy smooch, fondle, followed by a fuck. In the film's terms, the end of the war is significant not because Japanese Americans regain their citizenship, but because the married couple can be permanently united. This is an insult to a group of people who have been integral in building the American nation.<sup>12</sup>

#### DIFFERENT SOURCES OF MEANING: CASE STUDY OF THE JAPANESE STEREOTYPE OVER TIME

Different racially defined groups are often conflated,<sup>13</sup> but specific characteristics are sometimes also designated to each group. While these characteristics may be grounded in fearful imaginings, many are imbued with historical and political references. For example, compare the relatively numerous films about Chinese Americans to the few about Japanese Americans. Chinese Americans are usually located in a *Chinatown*. Most of the characters are sinister and exotic. In contrast, in recent films I found about Japanese Americans (*Karate Kid* series, *Come See the Paradise* and

*Showdown in Little Tokyo*), with the exception of *Showdown*, Japantowns are either absent or only of passing significance. And again with the exception of *Showdown*, the characters are nonthreatening. These differences reflect the actual absence of Japanese Americans from the social landscape. After their incarceration during WWII, many Japanese Americans did not resettle in Japantowns and intermarriage increased drastically. As a result, after the war they were not as *visible* as Chinese Americans and thus perhaps did not seem as threatening.

These depictions change in relation to political and historical factors.<sup>14</sup> For example, before WWII, in *Warnings of Mr. Moto* (Norman Foster, 1939), the Japanese Mr. Moto was working for an international force of investigators alongside Britain and the U.S. While somewhat effeminate, inscrutable and definitely clever, he is kind, ethical, and working for the right side. In contrast, movies produced around WWII, such as *Blood on the Sun* (Frank Lloyd, 1945) and *Tokyo Joe* (Stuart Heisler, 1949) portray the Japanese as an international threat, contriving to take over an unsuspecting world. Yet there are also differences between *Blood* and *Tokyo Joe*. In contrast to *Blood*, *Tokyo Joe* has some good Japanese with Western values who attempt to stop their country's tide of

Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon*



militarism. Nevertheless, these individuals are either killed or turn out to be traitors.

The depictions change again a decade after the war. In *Bad Day at Black Rock* (John Sturges, 1955), the injustice of the internment of Japanese Americans is addressed. Prototypic American figures of the '50's — the Western hero, the good American girl, a James Dean look-alike — attempt to cover up the murder of the Japanese American, Komoko. When a too inquisitive stranger (Spencer Tracy) comes to town looking for Komoko, they try to murder him as well. While the plot centres around the stranger's efforts to find Komoko, not one Japanese American character appears. Again, as in more recent films, there is an ambivalence about the absence of Japanese Americans from the American landscape. The clincher comes when we discover Komoko's son was given a war medal after he was killed in action while saving the stranger's life.<sup>15</sup> The martyrdom of Komoko's son contrasts with the corruption of the townsfolk, putting a critical light on America's treatment of Japanese American citizens during WWII.

Many recent films attempt to reformulate America's understanding of the Japanese and Japanese Americans. *Come See the Paradise* presents the internment of Japanese Americans as unjust; *Hiroshima Out of Ashes* (Peter Werner, 1990) takes on the guilt of bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki; *Empire of the Sun* (Steven Spielberg, 1987) sympathetically rewrites the representation of Japanese soldiers as men trying to be brave.

Yet this sympathy is likely to be short lived with the growing American hostility towards Japan's trade surplus and investment in the U.S. Recent American productions, *Black Rain*<sup>16</sup> and *Showdown in Little Tokyo* seem to foreshadow such a shift. Both appropriate the Chinatown motif. *Showdown in Little Tokyo* could be a typical Chinatown action-thriller if ritual disembowelment and other references to Japan were removed. *Black Rain* offers an interesting twist of the typical Chinatown action-thriller into the modern Japanese landscape. While several stereotypes specific to the Japanese appear — for example, the man as the gruff bearer of authority and modern Japan as a perverse mix of tradition and technology — the Chinese motif dominates. For example, corrupt affiliations to the Italian mafia<sup>17</sup> and ruthless Asian gangs now plague the Japanese social order. Again this demonstrates the flexible nature of stereotypes. In this case, the current resentment towards Japanese in the U.S. is solidified into the familiar and recurring fear of the Yellow Peril through the use of the Chinatown motif.

The situation is obviously more complex than films simply reflecting changing political sentiments. Other movies produced around the same time often take different ideological stances: compare *Come See the Paradise* (1990) to *Black Rain* (1989) and *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (1991). What these different stances may indicate are the contradictory strains of common sense that circulate in dominant ideology. So for example, *Come See* suggests a liberal sentiment that needs to address the guilt of internment of the Japanese Americans while *Black Rain* and *Showdown* suggest, as discussed above, xenophobia. The question as to how these differing perspectives can co-exist so comfortably needs to be explored.

## CONCLUSION

The *Asian* in Hollywood, then, is much more complex than simply an inaccurate or derogatory stereotype to be remedied by a good dose of realism. The *Asian* works to negotiate domestic and international relations to Asian American communities and Asian nations. It is a politically produced construct that operates in the realm of culture. Positioned outside of the march of history as unchanging cysts from ancient regimes, steeped in tradition, ruled by fear and violence, *Asians* in *Chinatown* represent a threat to Progress, Civilization, to Democracy (i.e., America). Excluded from the official history of the United States, Asian American contributions to building their nation and thus their right to citizenship are obscured. Placed outside of the reach of American logic and law, they represent a threat to the social order. For example, at the level of political intrigue, as the Yellow Peril, they scheme to take over the U.S. In the realm of sexual desire, interracial love pulls Americans outside of the mainstream of the U.S. rather than integrating foreigners into the social fabric. *Asians* remain foreigners not simply because they are signified as America's binary opposite, but because in particular they are incapable of comprehending individualism, one of the key tenets of American society. It is impossible for *Asians* to become Americans. They remain foreigners. They are imagined outside the political community of the American nation: thus the only solution to their presence is to either destroy or control them.

*I would like to thank Jose Arroyo for his critical support and feedback and Mari-Jane Medenwaldt for editorial comments.*

12. This is not to say that the movie has no value. For those who experienced the internment, in addition to its 'realistic' depiction of prewar communities and internment camps, the fact that such a movie was made is significant. For example, see Ken Mochizuki, "This is Not a Docudrama: Local Asian Americans React to Major Film on WWII Internment," *Northwest Nikkei*, February 91, p. 11 & 13 (American Newspaper) and Frank Moritsugu, "Watching Daughter's Broadway Debut a Thrill," *Nikkei Voice*, March 1991, p. 5 & 9.

13. For more on conflation see *Who Killed Vincent Chin* (Christine Choy and Renee Tajima, 1988) a documentary about a Chinese American who was murdered because he was mistaken for a Japanese citizen.

14. Two articles that discuss how the Asian stereotype changes in relation to the international and national economy are Robin Winks, "The Sinister Oriental: Thriller Fiction and the Asian Scene," *Journal of Popular Culture*, v. 19, #2, Fall 85, and Sue Fawn Chung, "From Fu Manchu, Evil Genius, to James Lee Wong, Popular Hero: A Study of Chinese Americans in Popular Periodical Fiction from 1920 to 1940," *Journal of Popular Culture*, v. X, #3, Winter 76.

15. This is a reference to the all Japanese American 442nd battalion who volunteered in order to prove the loyalty of Japanese Americans to America during WWII. (There is still controversy in the Japanese American community today over the significance of their choice). As well they were famous for their bravery. The movie *Go For Broke* was made about them in the '50's.

16. There is a Japanese production with the same title about the atomic bombings in 1945.

17. The recurrent affiliation between the Italian American mafia and Chinatown's underworld in Hollywood suggests on the one hand the process of conflation and on the other, a stereotype for ethnics who do not assimilate as retaining the corrupting influence of the old country.

# Myth and Melodrama

DOUGLAS SIRK'S IMITATION OF LIFE

The dream-myth that frames much of Douglas Sirk's Hollywood cinema is itself an 'imitation.' The very premise of what has become known as 'The American Dream' is fundamentally intangible in the actual world. Now an anachronism, it is a dream that belongs to a past era. When the narrator of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* looks across the landscape of the wealthy on Long Island, he muses:

by Peter C. Knowles

*I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes — a fresh green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment, man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.<sup>1</sup>*



Lana Turner and John Gavin in *Imitation of Life*

There are literary figures who deny the promises of the 'new world' — realized as early as Hawkeye's rejection of white society in Fenimore Cooper's *The Leatherstocking Tales* — but for the most part popular culture keeps trying to revitalize the timeworn ideals. In a series of melodramas in the 1950's, Douglas Sirk depicts a society rich in the fulfillments of American democracy: the strength of family and community, the freedom for self-development, the recognition of initiative and hard work, the easy access to prosperity. Yet a Sirk film contains its own contradictions, an implied doubt in the validity of the world it creates. Sirk's homage to the dream is deceptive. His postulation of the dream in deliberately artificial terms and the underlying critique of the value system it supports seriously question the legitimacy of America's democratic myth.

On the surface, Sirk's iconography presents romanticized images of the Eisenhower decade: a multiplicity of oil derricks stretching into a Texas dusk, a pastoral New England autumn complete with Old Mill and Deer, the revellers at Mardi Gras, the Miami Beach honeymoon, a secluded hilltop above a Sunday morning village in Ohio. Sirk, like

Fitzgerald, seeks out the romanticized vision indigenous to America, heightening it in a mise-en-scène that is ornamental, decorative, even (in Fitzgerald's phraseology) "gorgeous." This gives the Sirk films their noted 'story-book' quality, at once elaborate and picturesque, so artificially embellished as to seem disconnected from the actual world and, by extension, from any true quality of American life. But elements in the film erode the illusory structures. In Sirk's cinema, there is constant tension between the Dream mythology and the stronger, more dissenting, voice of melodrama. The pursuit of the dream uncovers, in its wake, a host of social antagonisms, personal hostilities, emotions drawn to excess — in the words of Sirk critic Michael Stern, "all the mistaken perceptions, lost chances, beautiful moments, and unfulfilled desires that characterize his world."<sup>2</sup> What gives Sirk's final film *Imitation of Life* (1959) its special significance is its fusion of two perspectives on the American Dream, one from a privileged position within

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1925), p. 182.

2. Michael Stern, *Douglas Sirk* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 197.

its parameters, the other exclusively from without.

The 'success myth,' a rags-to-riches motif that dates from 19th century Horatio Alger, recurs across several genres, notably the musical and the melodrama. The original *Imitation of Life*, directed by John Stahl and released in 1934, establishes Claudette Colbert's rise to fortune on one such myth. Visiting her small-time pancake parlour in Atlantic City, an eager opportunist asks her:

"Did you ever hear the story of Coca-Cola? Well, when they first put it on the market, they used to peddle it over these soda fountains for 5¢ a cup each. But it didn't make any money. One day a smart feller nudged the President and said, 'For \$100,000 I'll tell you in two words how to make millions!' Do you know what those two words were? ...Bottle it!"<sup>3</sup>

"Box it!" the man advises Colbert, with respect to her pancake flour: the simple formula opens the door to unprecedented profits. Resolution, singleness of purpose, sacrifice of material comfort (albeit on a limited scale) enable the ordinary American, regardless of gender or class position, to attain extraordinary heights of success. The same principles apply to the Hollywood myth of celebrity, adding, as a further benefit, the dimension of immense popularity, 'the love of millions.' "The general image of stardom can be seen as a version of the American Dream,"<sup>4</sup> writes Richard Dyer in *Stars*, outlining four elements of the 'success myth':

Particularly as developed in the star system, the success myth tries to orchestrate several contradictory elements:

(1) that ordinariness is the hallmark of the star (2) that the system rewards talent and 'specialness' (3) that lucky 'breaks,' which may happen to anyone typify the career of the star; and (4) that hard work and professionalism are necessary for stardom.<sup>5</sup>

The formula, as Dyer points out, is perhaps typified by *The Jolson Story*, released in 1946. Previous film-goers know the pattern from such films as *The Great Ziegfeld* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*; in the 50's and 60's, the lives of such diverse entertainers as Enrico Caruso, Glenn Miller, Lon Chaney, opera star Marjorie Lawrence, stripper Gypsy Rose Lee and comedienne Fanny Brice are simplified into a workable, generally standardized, formula. These show-biz 'bio-pics' transpose the rags-to-riches myth to the entertainment industry, evoking the illusion, among others, that access to stardom is a democratic freedom, within reach of any individual able to market his or her special talent.

The unifying figure in Sirk's *Imitation of Life* embodies this myth of the celebrity. The rise to fame of Lora Meredith, her lucky breaks, her response to the challenges of stardom show little modification of the bio-pic stereotype. In the Lana Turner persona, Lora is the romanticized fantasy of the self-styled Broadway star. We receive no indication of Lora's special gift or talent; we never see her as artist, but only as 'star.' There is only passing reference to the apparent five-year struggle that brings Lora from an unspecified Little Theatre to New York City, no dramatization of the actual 'work' that actors do. "I never really wanted anything but the stage," she confesses to Steve Archer. "And I'm going to be an actress. An important one."<sup>6</sup> Once that

Susan Kohner and Juanita Moore in *Imitation of Life*



the standard formula begins working, we never seriously doubt Lora's ability to realize her life-ambition. At her lowest ebb, she poses in a cheap modelling agency, sharing her initial spotlight with a St. Bernard dog; any implicit degradation, however, is diverted by the humour of the situation and Lora's invariable elegance under stress. Once on her way, Lora neatly sidesteps the threats to the woman who embarks on a high-risk career. She spurns the 'casting-couch' method of advancement, returning the mink-on-loan to unscrupulous agent Alan Loomis, assuring him, "I'll make it, Mr. Loomis. But it will be *my* way." (Loomis still becomes Lora's first contact, her admission ticket into the Broadway world.) Lora's ambitions deliver her from the threat of marriage, in this case to the highly desirable Steve Archer, with good looks and the apparent good sense to take security and salary rather than risk the chancy world of serious photography.

In the American myth, 'God helps those who help themselves,' and once that Lora proves her mettle, she becomes one of Fortune's special children. Broadway's leading playwright notices her spot with the St. Bernard, identifies a certain "je ne sais quoi" that he needs for a character in his new play. Lora flounders through her audition piece, but the enterprising woman knows how to assert herself, when to command attention. Lora advises playwright David Edwards as to the weaknesses in his comedy, gets a tailored role and in the subsequent press notices, 'a new star is born.' At the premiere party, Edwards takes Lora to the window of a Manhattan penthouse: "Well, lady, there's your new empire. Not big. It just stretches from 42nd to 52nd Street. But it's the heart of the world." In the opening scene of *Imitation of Life*, Lora is an insignificant unit in the crowd at Coney Island, as inconsequential as the anonymous fat man who ends up in the advertisement for beer. Now, Lora Meredith belongs to a higher sphere. A montage of overlapping images, a throwback to a familiar device of the early bio-pics, gives her career the allure of fantasy: her name in lights, the applause and curtain calls, a cover for *Newsweek*. The emblematic montage construct suggests at once how easy it is, within the bio-pic formula, to achieve and maintain a prestigious level of achievement.

Lora never comes down from this height. She will always be removed from the world of ordinary people, distanced from events, able to respond only in the 'mask' of celebrity. She rises above her co-dreamer Steve Archer, not just by rejecting his marriage proposal, but by achieving so easily what he, for all his talk of "chasing rainbows," cannot achieve at all. Steve sells out his dream of serious photography when the brewing company offers him a stable position; he is left, with his greying temples, to confess later to a still cherished ambition to follow "a dusty old rainbow." David Edwards is another colleague whom Lora leaves behind — Edwards, as the title of their first collaboration suggests, is only a "stopover." Despite his misgivings, Lora moves into serious drama, de-glamourizing her image to take on a dramatic role and (looking somewhat like Grace Kelly in *The Country Girl*) she attains a further height of celebrity status. "Tell her I was wrong," Edwards remarks to agent Loomis at Lora's premiere, his exit line from the film. When the movies beckon, it is not Hollywood, but an

Italian 'art film' director who offers Lora "the best part since Scarlett O'Hara." Presumably, this acknowledges Lora's graduation to serious acting; by 1959, the international film scene is of higher artistic repute than Hollywood, perhaps even Broadway. Nothing deters the woman who, as she herself claims, may be "too ambitious." Once embracing the professional demands of stardom, Lora cannot let go — her persona consumes her. She becomes 'star,' a mythic construct that welds both the Lana Turner of the movies and the Lora Meredith of Sirk's film: both women, real-life and fictitious, become synonymous.

But what does Lora Meredith achieve? Sirk exemplifies her life-dream in the opening credit design — the magically slow fall of enormous rhinestones across black velvet. Lora becomes part of the rich East. Her country estate outside New York City is one of Fitzgerald's "white palaces," a house of white staircases, a white brick fireplace, a white kitchen, white bedrooms for the daughters, with a coterie of service people and thoroughbred horses in the riding stables. There are expensive gowns by European designer Jean-Louis, opening night parties after the theatre, cocktails before dinner with movie impresarios, family picnics in the countryside on the weekends. Sirk, in fact, adorns the make-believe world of the rich in such ornament that he reduces Lora and her entourage to figures, as it were, in an enormous doll-house. As he writes in Jon Halliday's *Sirk on Sirk*:

The imitation of life is not the real life. Lana Turner's life is a very cheap imitation...There is a wonderful expression: seeing through a glass darkly. Everything, even life, is inevitably removed from you. You can't reach, or touch, the real. You just see reflections. If you try to grasp happiness itself, your fingers only meet glass.<sup>7</sup>

Lora may acquire the tangible rewards of the American Dream, but this means inhabiting a "glass" world — living out, as it were, the 'imitations of life.' Lora is, as the title song so aptly describes her, "a false creation." There is a vacancy of emotion to her character, a consuming tendency to self-absorption. In the bio-pic formula, a love interest humanizes the celebrity, brings the star to the level of common humanity. This convention stresses the heartbreak and sacrifice that the aspiring star undergoes in order to achieve professional success — the price that one pays if one steps outside the acceptable boundaries of bourgeois ambition.

Sirk, however, denies Lora Meredith this human dimension. After ten years of stardom, she admits to Annie Johnson:

"Funny, isn't it? After all this time, struggling and heart-

3. William Hurlbut, *Imitation of Life* (screenplay), Universal Pictures, 1934.

4. Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishers, 1979), p. 39.

5. Dyer, p. 48.

6. Eleanore Griffin and Allan Scott, *Imitation of Life* (screenplay), Universal-International, 1959. All further references to the screenplay of *Imitation of Life* will be enclosed in parentheses and inserted in the text.

7. Jon Halliday and Douglas Sirk, *Sirk on Sirk* (London: Secker and Warburn, 1972), p. 130.

break. And you make it. Then you find that something is missing."

The speech appears to trigger the next phase of the 'success myth' — the quest for completeness through a personal relationship. The title song already acts as a cue: songwriters Sammy Fain and Paul Francis Webster, who four years earlier knew that "love is a many-splendored thing," now proclaim, "Without love, you're only living / An imitation, an imitation of life." But Lora never finds the magical love. Sirk keeps mysteriously tight-lipped about the ten-year partnership with David Edwards — in the context of the narrative, theirs is only a working relationship. The film reduces Steve Archer's role to little more than a casual, perhaps obligatory, love-interest; he is always there to handle superficial problems, but curiously remote and uninvolved. In effect, actor John Gavin merely poses as the idealized male, a 'heart-throb' waiting for this chance to get into the narrative.

Lora's coldness is particularly vivid in her relationship with Annie Johnson. In the beginning, a natural intimacy develops outside socio-racial barriers: the two women work out a living arrangement that services both their interests. Lora's success, however, divides them. It is interesting that Lora chooses a play with "a coloured angle" as her initial venture into serious drama. She acknowledges the colour problem from a theatrical perspective, but not from a personal one. In the domestic sphere, she shows genuine consideration to the black woman, but when Annie speaks of her outside life, Lora admits:

Lora: It never occurred to me that you had any friends, Annie. You never have any visit you.

Annie: I know lots of people. Oh, hundreds. I belong to the Baptist Church. And I belong to several lodges, too.

Lora: I didn't know.

Annie: Miss Lora, you've never asked.

In the original *Imitation of Life*, Claudette Colbert accompanies her friend Delilah in her search for the runaway daughter Sarah-Jane. In the Sirk version, Annie searches alone. "Annie, what would I do without you?" Lora professes — but Sarah-Jane's later impersonation of an Old South servant gives a contradictory feeling. "That's quite a trick," Lora concedes. "I learned it from my mammy," Sarah-Jane tells her. "And she learned it from her old master before she belonged to you."

The mother-daughter relationship furthers Lora's loss of contact with her personal world. Susie is a wealthy debutante, born into class privilege, preoccupied with the trivial — lists of things to buy, boys to chase, proper etiquette for adolescent romance. She is favoured of Heaven so highly as to see, on one of her "perfect" nights, the proverbial falling star; Susie makes a wish that things might continue just as they are at this particular moment. *Imitation of Life*, coming in between *Gidget* and *A Summer Place*, furthers Sandra Dee's star persona as the frivolous rich girl with all the advantages. In the latter part of Sirk's film, Susie casts off this debutante status. Lora wants apparently to give Susie what she herself has been denied, but Susie rejects what her

mother offers her — the closet with "all the dresses fit for the daughter of a famous star" — and eventually the mother herself:

"Let's face it, Mother. Annie's always been more like a real mother. You never had any time for me...I'm sure you'd be much too busy to miss anyone. Much too busy...You've given me everything but yourself."

When Lora responds with a theatrical pose of nobility, Susie admonishes her: "Oh, Mama, stop acting. Stop trying to shift people as if they were pawns on a stage." Susie does leave home, choosing a life at a distant college to forge her independence, without the supports of her mother's world. With Annie dying and Susie away, Lora remains with Steve, but even with the path clear for intimacy, the relationship is static, paralyzed. Moments of humanness break through, particularly in the final scenes with Annie, but Lora, we feel, remains incomplete. She is the constructed personality, programmed to respond with the elegant, stylized gestures of the theatre. In effect, Lora is the 'imitation' that society rewards with such unmitigated success.

There is little such 'imitation' to the life of Annie Johnson. Lora may epitomize the celebrity myth, but Annie's character belongs clearly to the genre of melodrama and Sirk's treatment, often sentimental, creates the sympathy that we expect from the generic tradition. Sirk places Annie outside the reaches of the American Dream. While Lora Meredith sets no limit to her ambitions, Annie Johnson doesn't even dare to dream. While Lora pursues new horizons, reinvents new destinies, Annie's lot scarcely alters. Upon first meeting Lora, Annie asks no more than a position as a domestic, grateful for the minimal necessities, already adept at techniques of survival. She knows how to deal with lost children at Coney Island, how to ingratiate herself with the tenement landlord, how to pick up extra money for the household savings. Despite the improvement in her employer's status, however, Annie never escapes the stigma of the domestic. In the initial part of the film, the women share confidences, life stories; as the film progresses, Lora loses intimacy with her confidante. In a society that privileges white achievement, Annie inevitably assumes the role of the 'support' for Miss Lora and, later as mother-substitute for the white daughter. Annie retains a loyalty to her members of her own class; we learn, in her deathbed requests, of her solicitude for the less fortunate people in her parish, of her long-time contact, unknown to Lora, with the milkman at the old coldwater flat in New York.

But Annie has her own support. Unlike the spiritless, self-absorbed rich, Sirk's commoners keep in touch with religious ideals. Annie's religion teaches her neither to overreach herself nor to step outside the boundaries of her social destiny. In an attitude of resignation, Annie maintains,

"It's a sin to be ashamed of what you are. And it's even worse to pretend. Sarah-Jane has to learn that the Lord must have had His reasons for making some of us white and some of us black."



*Imitation of Life*

In this respect, Sirk is faithful to the original film: when Claudette Colbert scolds her daughter's rebuke of her black friend's colour, the Delilah/Annie character insists,

"Oh, it ain't her fault, Miss Bea. It ain't yourn and it ain't mine. I don't rightly know where the blame lies. It can't be all the Lord's It's got me puzzled."<sup>8</sup>

Neither film allows the black woman more than a "puzzlement" at the social deprivation her religion may condone. Annie Johnson, unquestioning of her faith, humbly adapts her life to a moral code of service and obedience. She accepts her faith in Christ — "He was real; He is real," she tells the two girls in the Christmas reading. She gives Susie practical advice, "The Lord wants all His Children to fall in love, when they're old enough and got sense enough"; she acknowledges her comparative good fortune, telling Steve, "Each day I count my blessings. I can remember a time when plenty of ham and eggs was more than a blessing. It

was a miracle." Frequently in his cinema, Sirk dramatizes the power of religious belief, a force that lures crowds to the suspect miracle in *The First Legion*, that inspires the pilot of *Battle Hymn* to devote his life to Korean war orphans. Perhaps the only way to make sense of the 'inspirational' *Magnificent Obsession* is to read the film as a Christian parable of redemption and forgiveness. There are tensions implicit in Sirk's treatment of religion — in some respects, it becomes another magical means to rationalize the bourgeois system. Religion, in the Sirk cinema, is at once a compulsive power and an anodyne, a solace that "saves" the guilt-ridden and the unfortunate from their personal despair.

But Sarah-Jane Johnson refuses to accept 'the lot that God ordains.' As a girl, she rejects the gift of a black rag doll, passes for white in the New York primary school and, in her teens, repudiates the destiny of blacks as live-ins, as a subculture of "chauffeurs and busboys." She tells Susie,

8. Hurlbut, *Imitation of Life*.

"I want to have a chance in life. I don't want to have to come through back doors or feel lower than other people or apologize for my mother's colour. She can't help her colour, but I can."

Yet, despite her opportunism, Sarah-Jane merely moves into the back streets of the white society, initially in the local village with her 'white trash' boyfriend, then in the "low-down dive" in the cheap districts of New York City. Sarah-Jane attains her highest status as a chorus girl at the 'Moulin Rouge,' a gaudy Vegas-style facsimile of the 'Folies Bergère.' Despite the shabbiness of life backstage, Sarah-Jane accepts this level of society as better than the service position that her mother so passively accepts. In effect, Sarah-Jane sets off on the same quest for stardom as does Lora Meredith, but without the lucky breaks or the easy triumphs. Her very posture as a white woman involves her in a tangle of deceptions, her success measured primarily in terms of her ability to deceive, first in the home, then in the social order. Of all the characters, Sarah-Jane assumes the most consummate 'mask'; as Michael Stern points out, "Sarah-Jane's passing for white is the original 'imitation of life' that defined the title."<sup>9</sup>

The ensuing filial conflict is more intense, more recogniz-

ably part of melodrama, than the clash between Susie and her mother. The major crisis in Susie's life (her infatuation with Steve Archer) resolves itself in a brief spat and an all-expenses paid move to college. But for Annie, there is no convenient resolution, none of Sirk's "magical coincidences"<sup>10</sup> to resolve the dilemma. Nor is there a male lover forever patient on the sidelines. Annie faces the very real loss of her daughter, her only life-support. To reclaim Sarah-Jane, it means traipsing off alone into the 'whites only' sections of the cities. When they meet for the last time, mother and daughter work out terms for a separation that will be, to all purposes, irrevocable. Unlike Lora, Annie cannot discover the simple solution. In the magical kingdom of the wealthy whites, any sort of malady is inconceivable — in Annie's lesser kingdom, heartbreak over Sarah-Jane induces her final deterioration in health. The melo- of Annie's story contradicts the implausible fantasy of the white women's success myth. Illness, entrapment, deprivation — motifs commonly associated with the woman's film — place Annie's story within a different, even opposing, frame of conventions.

Does Annie ultimately fall victim to the American Dream? The film — and Sirk's career — ends with one of his most elaborate set-pieces, a funeral service and procession

Lana Turner and John Gavin in *Imitation of Life*



that is disconcerting in its opulence. We have come to distrust any show of extravagance in the film and Sirk is faced with the problem of heightening the emotion of the finale in accordance with generic convention without withdrawing our sympathy from a woman who, alone in the film, lives a life unaffected by 'imitation.' We are so drawn to Annie through Juanita Moore's performance that we do not really want to see our admiration betrayed. But the funeral is, to all intentions, a celebration, a final confirmation of Annie's religious beliefs. "Our wedding day and the day we die are the great events of life," Annie maintains:

"I want to go the way I planned, especially the four white horses, and a band playing — no mourning, but proud and high-stepping, like I was going to glory."

Sirk actually mitigates the intensity of Annie's request — in the original film, her prototype Delilah projects her funeral in much more grandiose terms.<sup>11</sup> Both Mahalia Jackson's spiritual and the minister's oratory intensify the notion of "going home to live with my Lord"; the crowd of onlookers from Annie's parish give her an importance in the world that we have not anticipated from the preceding narrative. There are no crane or high overhead shots to accentuate the spectacle (as in the 1934 version) — the famous 'window shots' (the camera positioned behind a store window along the street) tend to adorn, even beautify, the white horses and the funeral carriage. The procession itself, a style of black funeral associated with New Orleans, seems obsolete, out-of-place in the modern metropolis. We are left with the final irony of a materialistic culture: the very 'bigness' of the funeral ostensibly compensates for Annie's deprivation and social immobility.

The funeral places the ending of *Imitation of Life* securely in the tradition of melodrama — it is the 'deus ex machine' that resolves, however slightly, the conflicts left open in the narrative. The ending restores the family unit and reinstates Lora as a mother figure without depriving her of the career goals previously attained. Now she appears to regain the humanity set aside in the leap into stardom. With a more forgiving Susie and a repentant Sarah-Jane, Lora, in her final shot in the film, reaches out to both girls. For a moment, Lora becomes the complete embodiment of the American Dream — a celebrity with 'the best of everything' and a mother on the same level as the ordinary woman viewer in the audience. Public achievement and personal happiness come magically together.

Yet the happiness of the ending is only a further 'imitation.' While it is possible to take the conclusion literally, Sirk himself suggests a deeper level of meaning:

You sense it's hopeless, even though in a very bare and brief little scene afterwards, the happy turn is being indicated. Everything seems to be OK, but you well know it isn't. But just drawing out the characters, you certainly could get a story — along the lines of hopelessness, of course.<sup>12</sup>

Lora's fixation to stardom is, in fact, a familiar motif in the

celebrity myth that sustains her character. Now that she has broken into movies, it is likely that she "will forget about her daughter again...and continue as the kind of actress she has been before."<sup>13</sup> Sarah-Jane, played with great feeling by Susan Kohnner, is in an even more "hopeless" situation. She has already turned her back on Miss Lora's household and on the black community. Any lessening of her life-ambition seems unlikely. She is one of Sirk's 'neurotic' characters, given over to a consuming ambition — like Rock Hudson in both *Magnificent Obsession* and *Battle Hymn* and, in a more perverse sense, the Robert Stack characters in *Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels*. As for Steve Archer and Susie, there is so little intensity to their personalities that they will presumably alter their dreams as quickly as their life situation demands.

The artificiality of the ending, however, corresponds to the larger thematic of *Imitation of Life*. Nothing is as it seems, or even as it could be. Sirk is a filmmaker who, like Frank Capra, can delineate the Dream, capture its essences, yet expose its inherent myths at the same time. Some critics have already noted how Douglas Sirk extends an essential Fitzgerald motif — the corruption of the American Dream — into a contemporary perspective. The Dream is as insubstantial in the Sirk cinema as in *The Great Gatsby*, possible only in a system of artifice, ultimately unrewarding and, in the case of Annie Johnson, whose story provides the true substance to the film, exclusive and dislocating. What still impresses about *Imitation of Life* is its opposition of American myth and American melodrama — and as the racial issue will further divide the country in the 1960's, it reveals how far removed America is from realizing "the last and greatest of all human dreams."

9. Stern, p. 191.

10. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 274.

11. In the 1934 version of *Imitation of Life*, Delilah tells Bea: "And I do want a long procession. I hope all the lodges turn out in full. And I hope it don't rain. I want to meet my maker with plenty of bands playing. I want to ride up to heaven in a white velvet hearse, silk velvet, purple satin inside the casket. I want them coloured folks' eyes to bulge out. And another thing, I want horses to the hearse. I don't like the smell of gasoline."

12. Halliday, p. 132.

13. Halliday, p. 132.

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# REPRESSION

OR  
HOW TO MAKE  
GOOD HOME MOVIES

by Marnie Parrell

I want to see the home movies that were never made.

I want to watch all the family moments that never made it to Kodachrome Regular 8. I think Kodak would agree that its rich saturated colours would beautifully preserve the deep greens and blues of a swollen bruise, or capture the festive mood of glistening red blood against the virgin white of small teeth. With a little planning, the manipulation and brutality of familial rape, incest, and neglect could be cleverly composed into narratives — the rich nauseous memories guaranteed to never fade if you simply remember to adjust the filters and lighting for those shots you are forced to take indoors.

Are home movies really movies about home? Or are those movies to home what canned laughter is to mirth? That is, home movies, like canned laughter, are indexical signs which draw our attention to the elusive signifiers of shared good times and safe loving homes. Home movies are understood to be benign glimpses into a carefree time when both the children and parents were younger, their relationships unsullied by the complications of adult life. These ghosts of parents and siblings that drift out of projectors and shimmer across movie screens couldn't possibly ridicule, terrorize, beat and abandon. These are Kodak families, and Kodak families just smile, smile, smile.

Home is where the lie lives.

Home didn't exist the way it appears on film. The film that

is my memory plays in split screen synchronicity with the projector. At 18 frames-per-second I watch that family around the Christmas tree. I see myself in Christmas clothes smiling and chewing gum. Suddenly, the film me stops chewing and smiling. I'm recorded looking frozen and emotionless. The film runs out. But the projector in my head continues to play the other film, complete with sound, that recorded the comment that made me stop chewing and smiling. The film in my mind captured the crying children and the stinging blows — we had committed the crime of changing our clothes before the recording of the family Christmas was complete. "Come down the stairs with your presents and smile god-damn it, it's Christmas." What would people think if it was Christmas and the kids weren't smiling?

I have been locked away in small canisters, trapped forever with an abusive, uncaring family. I am afraid of sound.

My fear of sound is a result of the claustrophobic terror that suffocated me in the darkened rooms of my parents' home as I strained against the wall of silence listening for the sounds that should have accompanied those home movies. I am afraid that one day I will have to listen to the sound that wasn't recorded. I am afraid that someday those ghosts, relegated to the ossuary, will regain their muted voices and with their foul breath will come the destruction of the carefully manicured familial lie. And where will that leave me? If my family history is a lie, what am I?

Kodak has recently abandoned the now barren Regular 8 to join its young prolific family of video. Kodak is like all the fathers who become bored because their child/wife/toy has lost its novelty, or ability to please. Kodak controls who remembers what and how. The camera was always dad's toy. Its magical ability to record was kept away from children and mom, ensuring that a fantasy family is the one retained for posterity's sake. In collusion with Kodak, dad ensured the film memories would mirror a positive image of him, unseen behind the lens, as sainted provider and confidant (commandant?). The family recorded in his image smiles stiffly back.

The mythical Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden because they gained a forbidden consciousness of themselves. This myth, repeated to each new generation and reaffirmed to the old, reveals a promise similar to that of the nuclear family myth: you can have everything you want, if you are willing to endure complete surrender of self. This surrender of a consciousness of one's self allows the false

Photos from *How to Make Good Movies*, Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester, N.Y.

*She: "This is the chapter I've been waiting for."*

*He: "Right! I've a feeling that this continuity idea is going to be good for our souls."*



images of home movies to become an honest reflection of life within the family. If you are willing to surrender the knowledge you have of your life at home, the one which is absent from those Kodak moments, you will be rewarded with the family you always wanted. One that cared for and about you. One that didn't fight, punish and condemn. However, if you challenge that image of yourself on the screen, if you refuse to provide complete subordination, the promises of the family become null and void.

They didn't record those memories for naught. Pictures don't lie, but humans do and will. It is difficult to convince even yourself that the evil that existed in day to day life really did exist if the vacations, birthdays and holidays are spotless reflections of a happy, contented family. "Now it couldn't have been so bad, remember that movie of your birthday?" One moment stands as a representation of all moments. But I know what happened when the camera stopped rolling. Life in a gulag may have an odd moment of relief; these moments, however, are not the ones that haunt the soul and destroy human spirit. They are all too brief escapes from pain, torture and humiliation.

I want to see all the home movies that were never made. Use your mouth the way a projector uses a lens, and let the real home movies play.

Satyajit Ray (right)  
directs a cafe scene in  
*Mahanagar (The Big  
City)*, 1963



## Ray's *Mahanagar*

ARATI CHOOSES INTEGRITY  
OVER SECURITY

by Fran Wong

Just a few months ago, on April 24, 1992, Satyajit Ray — artist, writer and filmmaker — died in his seventieth year.

In this article I am examining what I consider is the meaning and purpose of Ray's eleventh film, *Mahanagar* ('The Great City'): I believe Ray wanted to present an intimate portrait of Bengali family life in transition from traditional to modern ways. After giving a brief outline of Ray's life and work

## A BRIEF LOOK AT RAY'S LIFE AND WORK

Who was Satyajit Ray, and what was international film's influence on him and his influence on it? Jean Renoir said

he found Satyajit Ray's understanding of Western art and civilization "fantastic." Indeed, Ray's cultural inheritance is made up of a rich blend of Indian and Western tradition, heightened by the closeness to the Tagores and the creative genius of his grandfather and father. To this he added an important strand with his lifelong passion for Western classical music. Perhaps it is the main determinant in his sense of structure, form and rhythm. (Das Gupta *Cinema* 13)

Ray came from an illustrious family in West Bengal who helped to bring about what is known as the Bengali Renaissance which began in the nineteenth century and lasted till the early twentieth century. For approximately a hundred years, Bengalis' lives were based on the nineteenth century maxim:

'Speak in English, think in English, dream in English'.  
(Das Gupta *Talking* 55)

Rabindranath Tagore, the nineteenth century philosopher-poet, was a friend of the family, and Ray's grandfather, father and mother all had artistic ability. After Ray graduated from Calcutta University in economics, he went to Santiniketan, Tagore's university, where he studied with painters, musicians, and writers for two and a half years.

Returning to Calcutta, Ray worked for an English advertising firm and did two things particularly significant for his future. In 1947, the year of India's independence from Britain, he helped establish the Calcutta Film Society, which screened foreign films, and in 1950, in London, when he was working there for six months, he saw 99 films. In other words, Ray taught himself filmmaking by close observation — he used to take notes at films on "cutting, lighting, and use of music" (Nyce 6). He also made a practice of writing screenplays for literary works he knew were being adapted for the screen, then going to the films and comparing his version with what he saw and heard.

He was familiar with some film theory writing; he met and worked for Jean Renoir when he was filming *The River* (1951) in India, and had both him and Pudovkin come to speak at the Calcutta Film Society; and he saw and particularly admired the films of the Italian neorealists:

When he saw DeSica's *Bicycle Thief*, he was convinced

1. The information about attitudes towards the Bengali woman which I have used in this paper is from lectures given by Professor Nabaneeta Dev Sen of the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Calcutta, in her course, "The Bengali Woman: Symbols and Metaphors" at the Ninth International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies (or ISISSS), held at the University of Toronto in June 1987.

From this point on, this information, which provides a background for the cultural understanding of S. Ray's films, will be indicated by Professor Dev Sen's name in brackets — (Dev Sen) — following material from notes I took during her course.

to set the context for this work, I will discuss aspects of the life of a woman in a Bengali family. As a basis for this section, I am using a viewpoint on Bengali culture derived largely from a course I took in 1987 with Professor Nabaneeta Dev Sen.<sup>1</sup> Next, I will comment on the characters in *Mahanagar* in relation to the cultural theory just presented, then examine the film as an aesthetic work, and a social document.

that his idea of using non-professional actors and shooting mainly outside the artificial studio settings in natural light was entirely feasible. These ideas, which he had entertained well before his encounter with Italian neorealism, were to revolutionize serious filmmaking in India. (Nyce 6)

When Ray and his crew began making his first film *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road) in 1950, most of them had no experience in filmmaking. But Ray had drawn sketches of the whole movie, shot by shot so that "They learned as they went along — and produced a masterpiece" (Nyce 7).

Eventually the excellence of Ray's films was recognized worldwide, even though in language they were not easily accessible to other parts of India, let alone the rest of the world:

Ray's gifts [are] as a portrayer of the commonality which underlines human behaviour in different cultures. (Nyce xi)

Ray portrays the particular — stories about Bengalis — and shows us the universal — matters common to the whole human race.

[Ray's] humanism is a direct product of Tagorean-Ghandian compassion which rises above national and partisan considerations...Ray has sometimes been criticised for showing India's poverty abroad. But in his universal vision, the poverty or fatalism of an Indian somehow turns into the silent suffering of all mankind.[sic] (Das Gupta *Talking* 80)

In *Mahanagar* Ray is showing us social change in modern India, the upheaval caused by a middle-class woman's movement from her home into the world of work for pay. More particularly Ray shows us what happens in a Bengali family when a woman — wife, mother, and in-law — begins to diverge from the traditional cultural path. The story is about changing gender roles and values in a conservative society.

### THE BENGALI (OR INDIAN) WOMAN

To understand *Mahanagar*, it is necessary to know something of the culture in this conservative society. During the Bengali Renaissance men felt it their responsibility to improve the very low position of women in their society, as we see in Nikhil's attitude toward his wife, Bimila, in Ray's *The Home and the World* which was based on a story by Tagore. There was an attempt on the part of those in power, men, to empower the powerless, women. One of the ways Ray was influenced by this thinking about equality, or the lack of it, is in the number of films he made in which women are either the main, or very important, characters. Beginning with *Devi* (The Goddess) (1960), and *Teen Kanya* (Three Daughters) (1961), and continuing with *Mahanagar* (1963), *Charulata* (The Lonely Wife) (1964), and, twenty

years later, *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) (1984), Ray depicts women and their circumstances empathetically.

Women in Bengal, and India generally, were, and still are, second class citizens. As is the situation in many societies in the world, male rather than female children are preferred, and the traditions and structures of the culture affirm men as more worthwhile than women (Dev Sen). Misogyny is systemic but, because humans tend to accept their traditions without question, it is largely invisible.

Thus, in *Mahanagar* we find a Bengali family in Calcutta feeling the strain caused by change, Ray's favorite theme:

Ray pointed out to Marie Seton [a film historian and Ray's biographer] that all his films are "concerned with the new versus the old." (Nyce 3)

The central conflict in *Mahanagar* centers around Arati and her family's attitude toward her going outside her home to find work for pay. The only people who are happy she is doing this are, at first, her husband Subrata, and her 14-year-old sister-in-law, Bani. The others — Arati and Subrata's young son, Pintu, and Arati's in-laws, Priyagopal and Sarojini — are upset by her working away from home, even though it was not her idea in the first place — Subrata suggested it; and even though they profit by it — besides helping her family meet its financial obligations Arati buys small gifts for each of them with her first pay cheque.

What is the problem, if any with a married Bengali woman's taking a paying job outside her home? Subrata summarizes many societies' answer to the question when he says to Arati, in English, "A woman's place is in the home" (7):

Expressed in English as it is in the film, the proverb gives the western viewer a small jolt, but it is an authentic sample of a Victorian value system that still roosts in more orthodox circles in Bengal. 'You cannot translate it,' says Ray, 'it's so pithy.' Significantly, he wanted the English title of the film to be *A Woman's Place* instead of *The Big City*, but the idea did not catch on. (Robinson 150)

Robinson is suggesting here that, for the most part, this attitude towards woman's 'proper' sphere has changed, but in her 1987 course, "The Bengali Woman: Symbols and Metaphors," Dev Sen presented evidence to indicate this was not so. She says that the life of the upper caste Bengali woman in particular is still circumscribed by many role expectations, and even the life of the lower-middle-class woman like Arati, in basic ways remains as it was.

The Bengali/Indian view of women is that their character is passive, their actions are sexual, their duties relate to the household, and their space is indoors — in the kitchen and the bedroom. A Bengali woman lives under the control of men — her father, husband and son. A married woman has the highest ranking position: she has a husband, whereas a widow does not, and therefore is not valued because she cannot breed. A husbandless woman is 'a barren tree' and through various customs a widow's will-to-live is done

away with so that, even though *suthee*, or widow burning, is now officially forbidden, the cultural message still is, 'Your life is over.' (Dev Sen)

Cartoons and illustrations in Bengali society depict a 'good woman' as modest and oriental in looks and behaviour, but a 'bad woman' is immodest and Western looking. Bad women have short hair and scanty blouses, and wear dark lipstick. They are Circe- or witch-like. Another distinction between the good and the bad woman in Bengal is that the former is a domestic person, and the latter, an outsider, a person who is out in open space, not protected or supervised by any man.<sup>2</sup> (Dev Sen)

If a woman's identity is thought to be bound up in being a means to various ends for a man, then an 'unprotected' woman, one who does not belong to a man, is an anomaly. There is a prescribed cultural role widows are expected to play, but a divorcee (so-called) is problematic in that traditionally there is no role for her. She does not fit the cultural system so that no one knows what to do with her, or about her. She is an embarrassment, and perhaps even a danger to society since she is not 'contained' sexually.

An Indian saying about a wife is "If she is kept busy all the time, the question of her misbehaviour does not arise." That the misbehaviour referred to is sexual is indicated by another Indian saying: "A woman does not consider age or looks in a man; she has sex with anyone she can find." (Dev Sen)

The belief that a woman, if not restrained, that is, con-

2. Dev Sen explains that the fairy tales of Bengal emphasize this distinction between the 'inside' and the 'outside' woman too. The story generally tells of a man's initiation into the world. Any woman in the story is usually either the sender, or the prize. A woman is good if her role is passive, and bad if her role is active.

For instance, in one story a king goes hunting, meets a damsel in distress, and brings her home. She banishes the queen who had born a son, then the stables begin to empty — one more animal gone every night — and people begin to disappear too. The king becomes passive and stupid and the new queen is the real ruler. She sends the prince to a dangerous land to bring something back for her. He fights demons and, to her great shock, manages to return. He brings back a princess, the bad queen is tortured and killed by being buried alive, and the old queen is restored.

This fairy tale is a story about order, then disorder when an outsider intrudes, reversing the normal power relations, and then order again, a not unusual theme. The king fails to keep his kingdom under his control but manages to regain power through his son. The bad queen was actually a dehumanized demon: she was eating the animals, soldiers and servants; she was shrewd, false and demanding; and she made society suffer. The good queen, on the other hand, even when she was banished, lived in a hut she built herself within the confines of the court, not out in the world; she was the mother of a son; she was religious, self-sacrificing, simple and honest; and she suffered for society.

I think *Mahanagar* is somewhat like a modern version of this fairy tale in that there is relative order at the beginning, then disorder as Arati begins to work outside as well as inside the home, and then order again at the end as both Subrata and Arati accept her new 'outside' position. Arati, with the 'in the home' and 'outside the home' areas of her life, thus combines the roles of the 'good' and the 'bad' woman a departure from the tradition in which a woman was clearly one type or the other. The roundedness of her character and the complexity of the story line reflect Ray's interest in depicting women realistically.

### *Mahanagar*



fined to the home or kept busy, will 'run wild' sexually is one of the assumptions underlying the cultural values implicit in the proverb: "A woman's place is in the home."<sup>3</sup> The possibility the belief involves projection by men is supported by this description of what *might* happen to a woman who ventures out:

Very few Hindu wives are allowed to move frequently out of their homes, or can themselves dare to do so, for fear of being teased sexually by men on the way, or in public conveyances. They prefer to stay at home, buy vegetables from street vendors, look after the children, cook for the family, observe religious fasts for the well-being of their husbands and try to be good wives. (emphasis added) (Jha 75)

Like many other cultures around the world, India promulgates this myth of female promiscuity and sexual insatiability to rationalize its control over its women.<sup>4</sup> When a husband asks a wife whether she has been gulping water while taking a bath, the imagery of the metaphor may suggest the preciousness of water in a hot country. But the husband is really inquiring whether his wife is involved with another man. The metaphor is an image for sexual cheating. (Dev Sen)

One writer explains the Indian preoccupation with sex thus:

What makes [Indian culture] unique<sup>5</sup> among the cultures of the world is that it has constructed a wonderful edifice of encompassing systems of philosophy and codes of moral and social conduct which, though seemingly designed to serve social and moral purposes, are speculative fabrications in the justification and glorification of sensual pleasure...The activities of the Indian people are concerned with things that, directly or indirectly, satisfy sensual pleasure: food, sex (both marital and extra-marital), a house, gadgets, money, property, and so on...But the most overwhelming, as well as the intensest of all sensual pleasures, is naturally the pleasure of sexual union, which fuses and, at the same time, transcends them all. It is, therefore, understandable why, unlike any other ancient culture of the world[nt], sexual union occupies the most central place in ancient Indian cosmology, religion, philosophy and culture. (Jha 2-4)

If what Jha calls 'sensual-sexual pleasure' is the purpose of life from the Indian point of view, rather than work as in the West, then we would expect to find Indian society organized in such a way as to ensure the fulfillment of that purpose. In actual fact, it is organized so that *males* can achieve that pleasure since one of its basic principles is that men possess and control women: "A Bengali woman exists to please a man."

The bulk of the Indian film industry caters to the picture of the female as the willing follower of male-made rules about the purpose of her life. In song-and-dance films<sup>6</sup> the matter of female identity is ignored and instead the question of an 'appropriate' role for women as adjuncts to men is addressed:

From tradition and custom, reinforced over the centuries by mythology and all the arts, the urban male has inherited the ideal of the father-worshipping, brother-worshipping, husband-worshipping Indian woman. She is the Savitri of Indian mythology, endlessly reincarnated in story heroines. Intellectually, he now rejects this ideal emotionally, too, he is drawn to another image — the modern girl, free-thinking, accessible, sexually alluring, insistent on her own say in matters of romance — an international image that has a basis in fact and is also constantly underscored by the modern media, including advertising. The young Indian male would like such a girl, yet her independence threatens his ego, so well fortified by tradition. The Indian film lets him have his cake and eat it. A young film heroine, modern enough to choose her husband herself and often behaving with an exuberant informality, will after marriage fall at the feet of her husband and call him her "Kankanda Deivam" — the palpable god. This female stereotype, fusing old and new, satisfies both the male libido and superego. The god needs someone to worship him, not just love him. Film provides her. Satish Bahadur calls her "Savitri in slacks." (Barnouw & Krishnaswamy 282-83)

The effect of this cultural message on women is to give them a low self-image. Because they are treated as objects, they do not believe they are worth anything. In *Sampati*, the third film of Rya's *Teen Kanya* tryptich, a mother commiserates with her newlywed daughter, depressed because she did not want to marry:

"Don't cry, little one, please. Tears cannot help us. Don't cry. Such is our fate. We're like refuse floating on the river. We have nothing — we are nothing. That is why everyone scorns us." (subtitled dialogue from *Sampati*)

#### MAHANAGAR:

##### ARATI IN BOTH THE HOME AND THE WORLD

Arati in *Mahanagar* is unusual, then, in that she clearly values herself, going about her duties at home with composure because she knows she has an important function as the emotional centre of the family. She cares for everyone — Bani, her in-laws (she daily sees to it that her father-in-law takes his medication), Pintu and, not least, Subrata. She is what in Bengal is considered a 'good' wife/woman because she is concerned first of all for others rather than for herself. Her attitude is shown in many small details of family life and her responsiveness to others.

Even her positive reaction to Subrata's hint that she might look for work for pay is evidence of her being a 'good' wife. Till now, she has not thought of seeking employment outside her home. But once she realizes Subrata wishes she would earn some income to help alleviate the family's financial distress, she deeply desires to help, and takes the necessary steps.

But the family reacts to her being employed with confusion and anger. Subrata especially is caught between his

relief that he is not carrying the whole financial burden anymore and his wish to please his parents and conform to tradition: he pretends to his father it was entirely Arati's idea to get a job. (13)

Subrata is depressed because he feels helpless about his untenable position as provider for so many people, yet guilty that he is encouraging Arati to get a job. Eventually he succumbs to custom, capitulating in the "cold war" (13) between himself and his father. To assuage his guilt, he, in turn, exerts pressure upon Arati, claiming that everyone is miserable because she is going out to work. He will work part- as well as full-time, and she must resign. But the loss of his job changes his plans, although not his attitude; now he is threatened by Arati's role as sole provider.

Up till this point, Arati's main concern has been Subrata. (13) She is healthy enough within herself, however, and confident enough of her relationship with him, that, when he continues to act depressed, she protests being put in the double blind he has allowed himself to be put in. From his perspective, it is good that her job brings in money, but, it is bad that to earn this money, she has stopped being a 'good'

3. The interesting point here is that "A woman's place is in the home" is an English proverb, not Bengali, or Indian! One can understand, because of historical circumstances, what it is doing as part of Bengali culture. But the question is: what is it doing in English culture: and the answer is: It is indicative of the sex role stereotyping that is part of the Western cultural heritage. Traditionally, men have felt very free to tell women what they should be doing with their lives.

4. In this regard Nikhil's comments to his wife Bimala in Ray's *The Home and the World* are interesting. He tells her that *purdah*, the practice of keeping women in seclusion, is Muslim, not Hindu. He seems to be implying that the Muslim attitude towards women is a 'late entry' to Indian culture, and that the more culturally authentic attitude is the Hindu one which, in his opinion, allows women more personal freedom.

5. I question Jha's contention that Indian culture was *unique* in making sexual intercourse the center of all its systems. It may have done so *more* than other cultures, but there is evidence to suggest *all* cultures have been preoccupied with the sex act. In *Ultimate Issues*, April-June, 1990 (Editor & Publisher, 6020 Washington Blvd, Culver City, CA 90232), Dennis Prager writes about Judaism's sexual revolution:

Man's [sic] nature, undisciplined by values, will allow sex to dominate his life and the life of society. When Judaism demanded that all sexual activity be channeled into marriage, it changed the world...

This revolution consisted of forcing the sexual genie into the marital bottle. It ensured that sex no longer dominated society, heightened male-female love and sexuality (and thereby almost alone created the possibility of love and eroticism within marriage), and began the arduous task of elevating the status of women.

It is probably impossible for us who live thousands of years after Judaism began this process to perceive the extent to which sex can dominate, and has dominated, life.

Throughout the ancient world, and up to the recent past in many parts of the world, sexuality infused virtually all of society.

Human sexuality, especially male sexuality, is polymorphous, or utterly wild (far more so than animal sexuality)...There is little, animate or inanimate, that has not excited some men to orgasm.

Of course, not all these practices have been condoned by societies — parent-child incest and seducing another man's wife [or another woman's husband] have rarely been countenanced — but many have, and all illustrate what the unchanneled, or in Freudian terms, the "unsublimated" sex drive can lead to.

Among the consequences of the unchanneled sex drive is the sexualization of everything — including religion. Unless the sex drive is appropriately harnessed (not squelched — which leads to its own

wife. She does not reason with him, but simply continues to be a responsible and caring family member, asking him not to misunderstand (37).

Arati is also unusual in considering her work for pay important. In the time period in which the story is set, providing financially for her family was such a new and unaccustomed activity for an Indian woman that Arati could not take the necessary steps without encouragement from her husband and her new colleague, Edith. But gradually, before our eyes, she changes into a confident person who enjoys the opportunities her job provides. Necessity may have forced her out the door, but, once she discovers the outside world, she likes it.

Jha argues that the concept of work as pleasure is a Western importation into Indian culture:

The political, economic, judicial and educational institutions retained from British times depend, for their successful operation, on certain values and attitudes to life which grew out of Christian culture in the west and are, therefore, in complete conformity with the lives of the

destructive consequences), higher religion could not have developed.

Thus, the first thing Judaism did was to desexualize God — "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" by his [sic] will, not through any sexual behaviour. This was an utterly radical break with all religion, and it alone changed human history. The gods of virtually all civilizations engaged in sexual relations...

[For instance] In India until this century, certain Hindu cults have required intercourse between monks and nuns, and wives would have intercourse with priests who represent the god. Until it was made illegal in 1948, when India gained independence, Hindu temples in many parts of India had both women and boy prostitutes...

Judaism placed controls on sexual activity. It could no longer dominate religion and social life. It was to be sanctified — which in Hebrew means "separated" — from the world and placed in the home, in the bed of husband and wife...

The revolutionary nature of Judaism's prohibiting all forms of non-marital sex was nowhere more radical, more challenging to the prevailing assumptions of mankind, than with regard to homosexuality. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, Judaism may be said to have invented the notion of homosexuality, for in the ancient world sexuality was not divided between heterosexuality and homosexuality. That division was the Bible's doing. Before the Bible, the world divided sexuality between penetrator (active partner) and penetrated (passive partner)...

As Martha Nussbaum, professor of philosophy at Brown University, recently wrote, the ancients were no more concerned with people's gender preference than people today are with others' eating preferences... "The gender of the object... is not in itself morally problematic. Boys and women are very often treated interchangeably as objects of [male] desire. What is socially important is to penetrate rather than to be penetrated. Sex is understood fundamentally not as interaction, but as a doing of something to someone..."

Judaism changed it all. It rendered the "gender of the object" very "morally problematic"; it declared that no one is "interchangeable" sexually; and as a result, it ensured that sex would in fact be "fundamentally interaction" and not simply "a doing of something to someone."

— from "Judaism and Homosexuality, Part 1," *Ultimate Issues*, April-June, 1990.

6. Commercial (as opposed to 'art') Indian films are "resolutely escapist entertainment." (Ellis 239) 750 to 800 features are made each year, more than in any other country in the world. But each film conforms to a formula — several stars, six songs, three dances, the story lines are easily predictable, and "virtually no effort is demanded from the audience." (Sarkar 2) "The all-India film still avoids surnames, regional costumes and the geography of locations, holding up a superficial commonality which has no roots." (Das Gupta Cinema 14).



*Mahanagar, the search to find Arati a job*



*Mahanagar, Arati prepares her father-in-law's medicine.*

people in that part of the world....The matrix of those cultural values...is not sex but work. The highest pleasure is not sexual pleasure, but the pleasure of understanding, of intellectual comprehension, and above all of work. Work, vocation, realization of one's talents through their creative application, is linked to the sense of spiritual fulfillment and religious salvation. (Jha 167)

Arati's boss, Mr. Mukherji, is so impressed with her hard work that he plans to make her head of a sales group, and gives her the raise she requests. Among his salespeople she is 'the teacher's pet.'<sup>7</sup> Because Mukherji is Bengali, she and his other Bengali saleswomen have an automatic advantage. But Arati is even more favoured than the others. Mukherji likes her because she fits his image of a 'good' Bengali woman — quiet and efficient — and she is also "smart and attractive," just as his ad requested.

On the other hand, Mukherji rejects Edith. He does not like her and makes no attempt to hide his prejudice: "I wonder how much you know about these Anglo-Indian girls?" (45) He pays no attention to Arati's defence of her; his mind is made up.

Before Arati has met Mukherji, Subrata tells her "Your boss will be your second father" (10), and certainly Mukherji's cultural expectation is that Arati, like a 'good' Bengali daughter/wife/woman, will obey him without question. He expects to be in control and to have to answer to no one:

Listen, Mrs. Mazumdar, what I tell my employees and what I do with them is my business and mine alone...You've got to be on this side of the table to say things like that. You're overstepping the mark. (45-6)

But, like Subrata, Mukherji has not taken into account how Arati's stepping forth into the world has changed her. She refuses to play the role of submissive employee, she cannot ignore the unjust treatment of her friend, and, to make her views clear to Mukherji, she uses her one strong weapon — resignation.

Dev Sen suggests that in Bengal it is regarded as more radical for a woman like Arati to talk back to her boss than to have an affair. Bengalis expect that workers may become sexually involved with their colleagues, but they do not expect that a female employee will disagree with her male employer. The value system is that sexual unfaithfulness can be winked at, but what Mukherji considered insolence (23) — Edith's speaking for all the saleswomen — will not be tolerated.<sup>8</sup>

How then does Ray encourage filmgoers, especially those who, consciously or not, have a patriarchal worldview, to identify with Arati and approve of her actions? What is there in the film to make them empathize with her?

One of the things that is admirable about Arati is her character. In addition to looking attractive, she has a beautiful personality. She is caring and concerned not to hurt others. That she takes her in-laws and husband's views seriously is suggested by the number of scenes in the film showing their ambivalence and negativity about her job — almost

equal to the number showing her enjoyment of it.

This approach fits with Ray's reputation for having no villains. Subrata and his parents are more victims than villains in a society which psychologically 'hamstrings' half its members, then suffers the consequences of this systemic oppression in the lives of both the genders.

Mukherji is not intentionally evil either. He is simply behaving the way a man of the 50s or 60s in his position would. People in power believe they deserve it, and do not realize it has been given to them as part of their heritage.

Arati is successful at work, but she continues to conform culturally. She puts a section of her sari over her head as she goes in to her father-in-law and when she receives a ride home from Mukherji. She pays attention to how Subrata and Pintu are feeling. Contrary to Subrata's opinion that her job is exhausting her, she appears quite capable of handling both her job and her work at home. Her relationships are not suffering because of her new focus on earning money since she is not in conflict the way Subrata is.

The one way her behaviour is radical is in her defense of Edith. In her anger over the way Mukherji has treated her friend, she confronts him. For the time and place of the story, one woman speaking up on behalf of another to a

male boss is unusual behaviour.

Arati puts loyalty to another person, who is not even a full Bengali, above economic security for her family. Regardless of whether she is impulsive or not — it is Mukherji's opinion that impulsiveness is a fault in her — she acts on principle. For her, the cultural proverb "A Bengali woman exists to please a man" must be changed to "A Bengali woman does right, no matter what the cost."

In the end, then, Arati is a 'good woman' in both senses of the word. She is faithful to her husband in spite of opportunity to act otherwise, and she is faithful to her friend, standing on principle with no regard for the consequences: not only does she not manage to get Edith's job back for her, but she herself resigns. Her goodness extends even to her father-in-law, with whom she apparently was never really angry. (41-42)

First Arati takes on the world of work, then she takes on Indian culture with its faulty assessment of human worth based on being the right caste and nationality. Her goodness has extended beyond the bounds of what is expected by her society which considers her responsibility to be her family and its social circle, but not to an 'outsider' like Edith.

In the final scene Arati apologizes to Subrata for this

7. I am not familiar enough with Bengali people and culture to know for sure what the nature of Arati and Mukherji's relationship is. It appears to be 'business only,' but there are a few hints it might be otherwise, but they are subtle and ambiguous.

For instance, when Mukherji asks Arati how she likes her work, and she says "Very much" (23), he requests that she knit a pullover for his grandson on her machine with wool he will give her. He wants her to do a special favour for him.

And when Arati mentions being cold in Mukherji's air-conditioned office, he says: "You've got the machine, so why don't you knit yourself a pull-over and put it on when you come to see me?" (27) Possibly this is sexual innuendo — "I'd like to see you in a sweater" — but more likely Subrata sums up the comment's intent: "Something of a humourist, is he?" (27)

There is also a scene between Arati and Mukherji in his car as he drives her home, presumably from working late. This scene is not included in the English translation of the film script, but I would judge by the non-verbal communication that the relationship between the two is friendly but business-oriented.

Although the traditional thinking about women in Bengal is that they should not be let out of the house because their sexual desires will take precedence over their loyalty to their husbands, there is no indication in Arati's behaviour that she is interested romantically/sexually in any man other than Subrata. She is poised and self-confident in talking with men — her father, her father-in-law, her boss, the friend she happens to meet on the street and goes to the restaurant with — but she does not flirt with them.

Thus, it is hard to evaluate the following observations by Jha. Is he simply speaking in the context of the traditional Indian view of the relationship between the sexes, or do his comments have some application to Arati and Mukherji's relationship? Arati's behaviour seems to contrast sharply with that described by Jha as typical of the modern Indian person:

Having acquired English education and come into contact with western culture, the Hindus have come to adopt western ways of living, eating, dressing, learning and so on, but have held fast obdurately to old sexual attitudes. To even a highly educated and skilled male executive in the modern public or private establishment, a woman working under him tends to appear essentially no more than a sexual being, and a secretarial or official help only superficially. At the first vulnerable opportunity, he would, perhaps, attempt to grab her sexually. The woman, on her

part, has learnt that to be "modern" is to be liberal in sex and, if she is "prudent," she would concede to him for a price. If not, she would incur his wrath in some way or the other...His wife, in turn, if she has persuaded herself to be "modern," would also go in for sexual union with other men...

But all this is actually a part of indigenous culture: the pleasure of life is the pleasure of the senses, and since sex involves the pleasures of all the senses simultaneously, there could be no richer pleasure than sexual pleasure. The "modern" Indian dressed in a three-piece suit, working in a modern office and handling modern administrative, scientific or business problems, carries within him the traditional Indian attitude to women as basically a means of sexual gratification. So also the "modern" Indian woman, who is ultimately convinced that she can be of use to a man only as his sex partner: either as a "dutiful" wife or a flirtatious, passionate paramour...Both "modern" woman and "modern" man are hardly aware that they are being completely traditional in their sexual behaviour. (Jha 79)

From the beginning of her career with his company, Mukherji praises Arati highly. The fact that she, Subrata, and Mukherji are Bengali is mentioned several times throughout the course of the story, however, suggesting to me there is as much nationalistic chauvinism in his attitude toward Arati as favouritism and sexism. The question is: *why* does Mukherji like Arati so much? Is it because she is a very good salesperson, because she is an attractive woman, or because she, like him, is Bengali? As I perceive it, all three answers are pertinent.

Within the context of her job Arati appears to see herself only as her boss's loyal employee: that is, contrary to Jha's contention, she considers herself "of use to a man" or, more accurately, to a company, because of her working skills, *not* because she is a sexually attractive woman. Although Mukherji thinks highly of her, other than asking for a raise when Subrata loses his job, she does not try to take advantage of this fact. Mukherji, the 'teacher,' seems to have chosen Arati as a 'pet' rather than the other way around.

8. Mukherji's reaction towards Edith seems to be a mixture of racism and sexism: he is apparently convinced, with no evidence other than Edith's absence from work, that, as Edith puts it, she has been "having fun" (44), i.e., having sex with her fiancé.

Assuming any Bengali in his/her right mind would feel the way he does, he expresses incredulity when Arati inquires about how he treated Edith: "Don't tell me you've come to fight for that Anglo-Indian?" (44)

unconventional behaviour: "Don't be angry. Try to understand. Nobody else will, but *you must*." (46) He reassures her: "You stood up against injustice...I couldn't have done what you did" (46-47) and she speaks again of her need to be understood and accepted, even though she has behaved in a way different from the cultural norm: "Something was coming between us. Oh, don't ever let that happen again!" (47)

Having examined the expected role for women in Bengal, and Arati's behaviour in relation to it, we can now raise the question: what is Ray showing us through this film? What sort of aesthetic work and social document is it?

### RAY'S FILMMAKING AESTHETIC

Ray says that in choosing a film subject he looks for three elements which relate to the aesthetic aspect of a film — contrast, rhythm and pace. Contrast relates to both the emotional and visual aspects of a film, while rhythm and pace have to do with the unfolding of the narrative, using all the devices at one's disposal. (Rangoonwalla 102)

**A. CONTRAST:** Emotionally Subrata is a foil for Arati. There are many shots of him looking sensitive and troubled, a contrast to ones of Arati looking calm and contented. "Exit husband, enter wife" (36) is his melodramatic response when Arati comes home with a raise after he has lost his job. He is thinking in terms of a 'win/lose' situation, whereas Arati simply wants to contribute to the family financially as well as in other ways.

This self-pity is a direct inheritance from his father, who is always complaining about being a 'back number.' Subrata is naturally [sic] concerned that his wife will replace him in the position of economic power. Her gain in strength seems to him to diminish his own. (Nyce 86)

By the end of the film, in a way that is perhaps a little inconsistent with his earlier presentation (Nyce 86-7), Subrata is no longer a foil. Rather, he seems to understand that, even if both he and Arati have jobs, their relationship can be 'win/win.'

Visually, in the film's costuming, Edith looks Western with her skirt and high heels whereas Arati looks Indian in her sari. At first Edith seems much more daring than Arati but gradually, in part because of Edith's role modelling, Arati learns to act more and more boldly so that Edith too no longer contrasts with her in behaviour, or in feeling responses to situations.

**B. RHYTHM AND PACE:** *Mahanagar* proceeds in Ray's typical unhurried fashion. Much time is devoted, for instance, to showing Arati learning how to be a door-to-door salesperson. When asked whether the story of his film *Kanchanjungha*, with its lack of action, was suitable material

for the cinema, Ray said

Physical action alone does not constitute motion in the motion picture. The growth of a character, an idea, a relationship, is also a legitimate movement for a film. (Rangoonwalla 111)

Because Arati's character growth is central to the story, Ray considers it important to show her progress at her job.

The slow rhythm is also an outcome of Ray's "silent observer" point of view. He wants us to see the events take place before us and to draw our own conclusions." (Das Gupta *Cinema* 78)

Ray feels strongly about the non-verbal aspect of film:

The important thing in the cinema is the flow of images. Its visual movement should be so rich as to be able to fulfill itself without the use of words. Where the meaning of one language is constantly pointed out by another, it only shows how infirm the exercise of the first language is. Music fulfills itself in its autonomous flow of notes, without the help of words; why should not the cinema, with its flow of images? (Das Gupta *Cinema* 13)

There is about as much 'silence' (that is, no verbal communication, diegetic sound only) in *Mahanagar* as there is dialogue, and, just as in life, the non-verbal communication ('body language') carries more weight in conveying meaning than the verbal communication does.

Ray says that as a filmmaker he wants to:

find out ways of investing a story with organic cohesion, and filling it with detailed and truthful observation of human behaviour and relationships in a given milieu and a given set of events, avoiding stereotypes and stock situations, and sustaining interest visually, aurally and emotionally by a judicious use of the human and technical resources at one's disposal. (Robinson 333)

### RAY'S SOCIAL REALISM

Nyce believes "*Mahanagar* shows Ray's indebtedness to Italian neorealism better than any other of his films." (84) There are various neorealist features to Ray's films. For instance, the subject matter is often ordinary people in an ordinary situation, for instance, the business of daily life in the Mazumdar family. Ray has said:

I feel that an ordinary person — the man [sic] in the street if you like — is a more challenging subject for exploration than people in the heroic mould. It is the half shades, the hardly audible notes that I want to capture and explore...I am...one who finds muted emotions more interesting and challenging. (Nyce 198)

Since Ray was a commercial artist, the story in his films is

frequently told as much non-verbally as by dialogue — for example, Arati leaving the house for work for the first time, and Pintu pouting. At times Ray shot footage at actual locales rather than in a studio, sometimes because he wanted to, and sometimes because he had little money. Whatever the reason, the result is that certain Ray films have a documentary quality. Also, Ray believes in creating credibility gradually, by piling one small detail upon another:

the entire conventional approach (as exemplified by even the best American and British films) is wrong. Because the conventional approach tells you that the best way to tell a story is to leave out all except those elements which are directly related to the story, while [Ray's] work clearly indicates that if your theme is strong and simple, then you can include a hundred little apparently irrelevant details which, instead of obscuring the theme, only help to intensify it by contrast, and in addition create the illusion of actuality better. (Robinson 72)

*Mahanagar*, Subrata breaks the news to his father that Arati has taken a job



*Mahanagar*, the fact that Arati proves a success at her job selling knitting machines begins to disturb Subrata



Another feature of neorealism has to do with the narrative:

The ambiguity of neorealist films is also a product of a narration that refuses to yield an omniscient knowledge of events, as if the totality of reality is simply unknowable. This is especially evident in the film's endings. (Bordwell & Thompson 396)

Unlike DeSica's *Bicycle Thief* and *Umberto D* (and the much later slice-of-life film of Nair, *Salaam Bombay!*), *Mahanagar* reaches a certain resolution, although it was not an ending which pleased everybody. Ray speaks of it as semi-optimistic:

The couple has come together. This gives them courage. Not that both will get jobs so easily. But they can face the future together. It is no easy solution to their problems or to the problems of their time. (Rangoonwalla 110)

Neorealist films are "films with the goal of revealing contemporary social conditions" (Bordwell & Thompson 395). In them "characters and their lives (plot incidents) are used deliberately to express an ideology" (Ellis 218).

While Ray would not necessarily have called himself a neorealist (asked if he thought his films belonged to any of the accepted schools of realism, he said, "No...the style in every film is dictated by the subject and material at hand" (Rangoonwalla 102)), 'social realism' is an appropriate term to categorize his work since most of his films are realistic in style, and many depict the society he knows best — that of Bengal:

'Not for a moment did I feel that I was acting. The character was so real. I seemed to know her. She was like someone I had seen,' says Madhabi Mukherjee [a Bengali], of her performance as Arati...As *Time's* review put it, 'Ray's camera merely eavesdrops on everyday life.' (Robinson 149)

In making *Mahanagar* Ray chose to film a story he liked, one which does not have a heavy ideological emphasis, but which depicts the importance of "freedom of choice for both women and men" (Robinson 149). Neither Mitra, the author of the story *Mahanagar* is based on, nor Ray advocated the overthrow of the family to provide this freedom. Change occurs, yet the extended family is preserved in an intimate relationship. Questions of how deep that change is, or how long it will take to be completed, are raised but not fully answered.

All the main males in the story, for instance, are interconnected. Initially, Subrata asserts that he and his father are interchangeable, at least when it comes to their attitude toward appropriate behaviour for women: "I'm a diehard conservative like father." (7)

When Arati is attempting to go to work for the first time, Pintu lies on the bed and sulks. Subrata tells Arati his father has not said a word to him for six weeks (presumably the length of time she has been at her job). Where did Pintu learn how to give people the 'silent treatment'? Clearly he is

'acting out' both his father's and grandfather's grief. They feel abandoned.

The acquaintance Arati meets and goes to the restaurant with for tea has the same attitude as Subrata and his father. When Arati tells him he ought to buy a machine for his wife from her, he says, "Knitting machine, washing machine — this woman won't have any work to do at all!" (39) Also, Arati feels it necessary to lie to him about why she has a job and about Subrata's work. She is protecting her husband from the criticism she knows would be aimed at him if she told the truth.

Arati's father says, "To think that you should have to suffer like this. Making you work —" (34). He feels sorry for Arati but she does not feel sorry for herself. When he continues to try to stir up self-pity in her: "But now you're the only — [provider]" (35), she interrupts him curtly: "Go inside, father. Your tea's getting cold." (35)

And when Subrata comes to Mukherji's office, Mukherji, the character who seems to have the most power, economic and otherwise, reminds Subrata of that fact, then explicitly identifies with him: "It so happens I have got the pull; you haven't. And most important of all, we both come from the same place. Simple!" (44) Mukherji is welcoming Subrata to the 'club' — those who can expect other people with 'pull' to do things for them — on the basis of his being a fellow Bengali but probably also on the basis of his being male.

We are not told why Subrata comes to see Mukherji, only that Subrata does not want Arati to know about his visit. (44) That secrecy is part of the policy of the 'old boys' network: Subrata is checking up on her and the man she reports to (who kept her at work late the other night, then gave her a ride home). But Mukherji will not tell her Subrata saw him.

What are we to make of all these connections? Is the interchangeability an indication of the destructive power of patriarchy in which not just women but men too become reified? Women are 'comfort object,' providing food, and sex or affection; men are the oppressors, working so hard at keeping women in 'their place' that they lose their individuality, and they too are turned into objects, mere consumers of the comforts they insist upon receiving. Stated baldly, the foregoing contention may seem harsh, but it is the direction in which Mitra and Ray point.

Ray is critiquing the unexamined basis of Bengali society where men try to demand total love of women, then pay the price for this coercion; and where women conform to men's agenda for them, then pay the price of dependency for this protection.

"What every person desires is unfailing love." (Proverbs 19:22) Turning the need for love into a power struggle, Indian (human) culture has tried to see to it that, if all the 'rules' are followed correctly, *males* will receive that unfailing love from females. The hitch, of course, is that no human, male or female, is either fully deserving of, or fully able to give, unfailing love.

Each gender struggles with its dependency on the other, a frequent theme in Ray's work which is illustrated visually by the difference between the endings of *Mahanagar* and *Charulata*. Just before they walk away through Calcutta

together, Arati and Subrata briefly hold hands, a sign of their restored unity. But *Charulata* ends in a freeze-frame with Charu's and Bhupati's hands not quite reaching each other, not quite touching.

Since Ray does not moralize, we have had to examine and interpret the images of the film to discover how he feels about Arati and her behaviour. Ray suggested the claustrophobia of the Mazumdar house by letting us see its three small rooms for a family of six, and hear its noises, like the neighbours' radio playing continuously, day and night. In that setting he showed us a woman who was not trying to escape its enforced 'togetherness,' but rather who made the best of these challenging circumstances. Arati's dilemma is not: 'Should she take a job outside her home?' but 'Can she take a job for pay and still please everyone, herself included?'

For the Indian woman the conflict can be particularly acute, because those around her expect more than is expected of women in the West. (Robinson 150)

But Arati is one Bengali woman who slowly manages to break free of some of the cultural restrictions binding her. She recognizes the importance of her interdependence and connection with her family and her friend, and acts on the basis of that commitment.

## WORKS CONSULTED

### FILMOGRAPHY: PRIMARY SOURCES

#### Satyajit Ray's Films

1960

*Devi* (The Goddess). Director: S. Ray. Producer: S. Ray Productions. Screenplay: S. Ray, from the short story "Devi" by Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee, on a theme by Rabindranath Tagore. Photography: Subrata Mitra. Editor: Dulal Dutta. Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta. Music: Ali Akbar Khan. 93 mins.

1961

*Teen Kanya* (Three Daughters). Director: S. Ray. Producer: Satyajit Ray Productions. Screenplay: S. Ray, from three stories by Rabindranath Tagore. Photography: Soumendu Roy. Editor: Dulal Dutta. Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta. Music: S. Ray Sound.

*The Postmaster*, 56 mins.; *Monihara*, 61 mins.; and *Sampati*, 56 mins. (For reasons of length, *Monihara* is often omitted and the title *Two Daughters* is used for this shorter version.)

1963

*Mahanagar* (The Big (or Great) City). Director: S. Ray. Producer: R.D. Bansal and Co. Screenplay: S. Ray, from the short story "Abataranika" by Narendranath Mitra. Photography: Subrata Mitra. Editor: Dulal Dutta. Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta. Music: S. Ray Sound. 131 mins.

*Spotting Sheets, Mahanagar* (The Great City) by S. Ray. National Education and Information Films Limited, National House, Apollo Bunder, Tulloch Road, Bombay. 1.

An English translation of the film's largely Bengali dialogue.

\* Quotations from this dialogue appear 1) with the character who said the line(s) named, 2) in quotation marks, and 3) with the

page reference to the Spotting Sheets in brackets after them.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS	ACTORS
Arati Mazumdar, the wife	Madhabi Mukherjee
Subrata Mazumdar, the husband	Anil Chatterjee
Pintu, Arati and Subrata's son	Prasenjit Sarkar
Bani, Subrata's sister	Jaya Bhaduri
Sarojini, Subrata's mother	Sefalika Devi
Priyagopal, Subrata's father	Haren Chatterjee
Edith, Arati's co-worker & friend	Vicky Redwood
Himansu Mukherji, Arati's boss	Haradhan Banerjee

1964

*Charulata* (The Lonely Wife). Director: S. Ray. Producer: R. D. Bansal and Co. Screenplay: S. Ray, from the novella *Nastanirh* by Rabindranath Tagore. Photography: Subrata Mitra. Editor: Dulal Dutta. Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta. Music: S. Ray Sound. 117 mins.

1984

*Ghare Baire* (The Home and The World). Director: S. Ray. Producer: National Film Development Corporation of India. Screenplay: S. Ray, from the novel *Ghare Baire* by Rabindranath Tagore. Photography: Soumendu Roy. Editor: Dulal Dutta. Art Director: Asok Bose. Music: S. Ray Sound. 140 mins.

### Other Indian Films

1985

*Baroma* (also spelled Paroma). Director: Aparna Sen. Producer: Aparna Sen. Screenplay (two versions: Bengali and Hindi): Arpana Sen. Music: Arpana Sen.

1988

*Salaam Bombay!* Director: Mira Nair. Indian-British production. 113 mins.

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# Doubling Narratives

DERELICTION AND DESIRE  
IN JULIE ZANDO'S  
*LET'S PLAY PRISONERS*

*by Jessica Bradley*

"And I can no longer race toward what I love and the more I love the more I become captive, held back by weightlessness that immobilizes me. And I grow angry, I struggle, I scream — I want out of this prison. Out of what prison? Where am I cloistered? I see nothing confining me. The prison is within myself, and it is I who am its captive. How to get out? And why am I thus detained"?<sup>1</sup>



Luce Irigaray's violent poetics speak of a struggle for identity in which the daughter's love and desire for her mother's affirmation leads to a cycle of entrapment. Julie Zando's videotape *Let's Play Prisoners* explores an equally passionate struggle for identity in the retrospective recounting of a relationship between two young girls as it was played out in games of dominance and submission.<sup>2</sup> While Irigaray's text "...and the one doesn't stir without the other," refers specifically to the mother daughter-relationship, the stories told in Zando's videotape bear the symbolic force of that primary bond. Using the model of the game as a guiding principle, she recreates the dynamics of power as it is exchanged not just between two friends, but more generally between female subjects. In her use of a series of doublings and temporal alternations, the repetition of girlhood stories increasingly describes a larger narrative by re-tracing links between infant dependency, childhood fantasies and adult sexual desire. Relationships between mother and infant and mother and daughter, as well as between girls and between women, are compounded in the narrative structure of *Let's Play Prisoners*. This reading will consider the little girl's games as an allegory of dereliction — that is, of thwarted desires and the struggle to reckon with loss.

If, as Jessica Benjamin believes, feminist theory necessarily addresses the psychological bond between the powerful and the powerless, *Let's Play Prisoners* resonates with a significance beyond that of the apparent narratives. In Benjamin's view simple reversals or attempts to gain equal power will not overcome a more deeply inscribed logic which equates one gender with domination and the other with submission. As a new generation of women who distanced themselves from what they saw as the unenviable lot of their mother's lives become mothers themselves, the question of their position as desiring subjects in a libidinal economy where they continue to represent need returns with a renewed urgency. Crucial to the bondage which Benjamin describes as resulting from the polarization of power and dependency is the dereliction of feminine desire.

*Let's Play Prisoners* begins with an intimate scene of two women touching either. In fact, their naked bodies are so close to the screen that focus cannot be maintained. Silent caresses, stroking and grasping movements are perceived against a soundtrack of finger snapping, breathing and menacing electronic tonal variations. This sexually charged scene is permeated with an atmosphere of threat and foreboding. A voice-over begins to recount the story of a particularly violent game in which the more passive of two little girls is slapped and thrown against the school cloakroom wall by her aggressive friend. The two women who we see in these opening scenes will return. They are the first of a number of female pairs that delineate the psycho-sexual dimensions of the stories recounted in *Let's Play Prisoners*.

Zando structures this densely layered work around a series of doublings in which her own role as artist-director becomes central in the dynamics of power revealed in her script. As she leads another woman (the author of the stories and Zando's co-producer, Jo Anstey) through the retelling of several troubling incidents from a girlhood friendship she insists that this recollection of painful events

be told in a particular manner, like a story. Her cajoling is manifested in several re-takes and at one point she even slaps her performer in order to achieve a re-creation of the rage and humiliation which lay beneath her girlhood compliance. Drawing out the desired tone from her performer, Zando virtually possesses and shapes the stories, just as the one child coerced the other to participate in her narratives. In effect, her interventions become part of the continuous work of revision and invention toward the construction of a narrative of the self, a process emphasized by the performer's changes in make-up and costume from scene to scene as she, in turn, negotiates her role by reflecting a range of positions from childhood vulnerability to adult feminine masquerade. This director-performer relationship is then re-played in parallel sequences with a little girl taking up where the adult performer leaves off. She repeats the story under the affectionate guidance of her mother. Or, to put it differently, the little girl's speech is "scripted" by the mother who encourages, prompts and corrects her. And this mother-daughter pair who double for Zando and her performer — themselves representative of the childhood friends in the stories — are figuratively doubled in an anterior moment through archival clips of a mother and infant interacting. These latter sequences from home movies are dispersed at crucial points in the repetition of the stories. The temporal recession of these multiple doublings is seen in counterpoint to the immediacy of two women engaged in an erotic encounter. Their naked bodies are interposed at several instances between storyteller and listener, delineating a lesbian sub-text in the construction of a cross-generational narrative of desire devoid of any male term.

As the title suggests, *Let's Play Prisoners* concerns bonds which are created, demanded and accepted as part of a tacit and intimate contract. The stories told revolve around the unbounded cruelty of one child and the fierce loyalty of another. The lines of force binding their friendship are formed along a sado-masochistic axis in which dependency and need complement power and control. Throughout their games the more passive child desperately seeks the love and respect of her abusive and manipulative friend, enduring humiliation, physical discomfort and fear in order to ensure the continuation of the friendship. In their games improbable situations are graphically fantasized to provide a hyperbolic framework for role playing. And role playing is what Zando, in turn, demands of her performer in the telling of the stories. Like the cathartic narratives of fairy

1. Irigaray, Luce "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other," translated by Helene Vivienne Wenzel, *Signs*, 1981, vol. 7, no. 1 (originally published as *Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre*, 1979, Paris, Minuit), p. 60.

2. Until recently Julie Zando was a Buffalo-based artist. She now lives in Madison, Wisconsin, where she teaches at the University of Wisconsin. Her work has been shown internationally since the mid-eighties and has been featured in several gay and lesbian film and video festivals. It is characterized by a tension between dominant socio-sexual narratives and individual identity politics to which questions of power are so central. *Let's Play Prisoners* (1988, b&w, 22 minutes) and *The Bus Stops Here* (Three Case Histories) (1990, b&w, 27 minutes), Zando's most lengthy and complex works to date, point specifically to the restrictive definitions and roles ascribed to femininity in traditional family structures and how these are reinforced by classical psychoanalytic discourse.

tales in which the forces of good and evil are brought into play, the little girls' games involve the opposition of weakness and strength with their concomitant fantasies of risk and salvation. Power is manifested as a substitute for love, and powerlessness as a means to becoming or remaining lovable. Play may be viewed as a safe place, a space for regression and sublimation through imagined narratives of power and surrender — a description not unlike those often applied to the interaction of fantasy and desire in sexual encounters. In both instances a primary plenitude in which imaginary omnipotence and real dependency are bound is reactivated.

The central scene in Zando's work, a series of interviews or sessions, is one in which the significance of the performer's girlhood submissiveness and her feelings of humiliation is revealed in the process of remembering and telling. In this respect, Zando's use of doubling may be interpreted as a metaphor for the interaction of conscious and unconscious registers. In fact, *Let's Play Prisoners* is divided into two parts entitled "Remembrance" and "Recognition." The layering of narratives, the director's relationship to her performer and the mechanism of repetition all recall processes characteristic of the psychoanalytic scene, a place for telling very personal stories, for the construction of a narrative of the self. Susan Stewart has described the narrative of the self as functioning by virtue of "that story's lost point of identity with the mother and its perpetual desire for reunion and incorporation, for the repetition which is not a repetition."<sup>3</sup> In *Let's Play Prisoners* the presence of the script, the appearance of the director's hand to arrange her subject's clothing or hair, and the lack of pretense signified by the movements of a hand held camera in both the contemporary and archival scenes of mothers and daughters, are among the disruptions in narrative fluidity which expose the construction of such a narrative. It is a narrative that takes shape around a sense of loss, a desire for union, a problematic identification with the mother and the role of these in patterns of repetition. And central to the struggle for power depicted in *Let's Play Prisoners* is the relationship between identity and desire.

The intensity of the girlhood friendship as it is retold and recontextualized in *Let's Play Prisoners* may be compared to the dynamics of power and recognition described by Jessica Benjamin in her book *The Bonds of Love*.<sup>4</sup> Making use of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Benjamin describes how sadistic domination and masochistic submission are bound in the struggle for autonomy and recognition. Her account requires a modification of the view put forward by Freudian and Lacanian theory that we accede to subjecthood through a process of separation of self from other. Benjamin recasts this image of rupture as an oscillation in which acknowledgement of the other is integral to recognition of the self. Thus, in her view, domination originates in a negative transformation of the equilibrium between self and other. It is on this basis that she reconsiders the gendered positions of aggression and passivity which, she proposes, result from a psychic structure in which mutuality is forsaken as one person plays subject and the other object — a dynamic inscribed and culturally reinforced in the nexus of primary

relations with the mother. Importantly, Benjamin's adherence to an intersubjective approach based in Object Relations theory by no means excludes the intrapsychic concept of the unconscious. As she states: "It is only against the background of the mind's private space that the real other stands out in relief."<sup>5</sup>

While Benjamin's reliance on more sociologically based theories such as Nancy Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering* allows her to outline an alternative model of psycho-sexual differentiation, she adheres to classical psychoanalytic approaches in positing the primary struggle for autonomy in the realm of the body and its pleasures, for controlling the body is one of the first steps toward independence. And that control, at least initially, is usually imposed by the mother or another woman, in the supervision of weaning, feeding and toilet training. Thus the relationship between mother and infant is seen as laying the foundation for adult eroticism. From her perspective, the journey of the male child away from primary identification with the mother is necessarily fraught with difficulty for it requires a radical assertion of autonomy and differentiation to establish and maintain his otherness. The girl's relatively undisturbed identification with her mother, however, presents different challenges to her individuation. Benjamin problematizes theories, such as Chodorow's, which posit an easy or natural identification between mother and daughter. Significantly, she asserts that the desire to inflict or receive pain, even as it seeks to break through boundaries, is also an effort to find them. She points toward the relationship between power and desire, and how these become inaccessible to the little girl when she says: "to the extent that the mother has sacrificed her own independence the girl's attempt at independence would represent an assertion of power for which she has no basis in identification."<sup>6</sup>

Jessica Benjamin has said that "the question of woman's desire actually runs parallel to the question of power."<sup>7</sup> Because there are aspects of Zando's work which point to more complex questions about the relationship between female sexuality, desire and power, this reading will explore links between Benjamin's theory of the gendering of dominance and submission and the impossibility of representing feminine desire in a symbolic order in which women are objects of exchange between men, a condition addressed in several of Luce Irigaray's texts. Benjamin draws upon Object Relations theory to reinstate the mother and to emphasize the effects of her culturally desexualized position for woman's desire. Luce Irigaray analyses the "homosexual" libidinal economy, as it is reiterated in classical psychoanalysis, which subjects feminine desire to masculine models. Irigaray constantly draws attention to a symbolic system which reinforces the father-son bond but which offers no similar representation of a feminine genealogy. The lesbian relations in *Let's Play Prisoners* may be read against this libidinal economy in which relations between men are forged across the bodies of woman.

Dereliction is Irigaray's term for the unsymbolized state of woman's desire.<sup>8</sup> She speaks of this lack of symbolization in terms of mourning, that is, as an expression of loss which female subjects cannot complete for lack of knowing what it

is they have lost.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the themes of power and loss made explicit by Zando's voice-overs ("...both women mourn that which they have lost, its because we've lost power that we need each other") may be interpreted as constitutive not only of the struggle for autonomy and recognition common to all relationships as it is reflected in the narrative fantasies of the little girls' games, but also of an identificatory drama with the mother issuing from this unsymbolized loss and unrepresentable desire.

Woman's tendency toward ideal love is for Benjamin the key to understanding both feminine desire and patterns of submission. According to her, the wish to be found and known which characterizes the fantasy of submission is, in essence, a desire for access to one's own interior that has found no external expression. Could she mean that as there is no place for expression of her desire in the symbolic order — that external structure which is psychically internalized, that she is destined to seek the discovery or awakening of her desire vicariously, through an other's agency? Indeed, what are the consequences for woman of the conflation of desire and power in the phallus? As

3. Stewart, Susan *On Longing — Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*, 1984, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, p. xii

4. Benjamin, Jessica *The Bonds of Love — Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, 1988, New York, Pantheon Books

5. *Ibid.* p. 21

6. *Ibid.* p. 79

7. Benjamin, Jessica "A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed. *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, 1986, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 78

8. The concept of dereliction is found throughout Irigaray's texts but is elaborated in a series of complex texts published under the title of *Ethique de la Différence Sexuelle*, 1984, Paris, Minuit. Margaret Whitford's article "Re-reading Irigaray" in Teresa Brennan, etc., *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, 1989 London, Routledge, traces and defines this concept in Irigaray's work.

9. Irigaray, Luce *Speculum of the Other Woman (Speculum de l'autre femme)*, 1974) translated by Gillian C. Gill, 1984, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, p. 68:

"The little girl, obviously does not know what she is losing in discovering her 'castration' or in the 'catastrophe' of her relationship first with her mother and subsequently with other women. She has then no consciousness of her sexual impulses, of her libidinal economy and, more particularly, of her original desire and her desire for origin. In more ways than one it is really a question for her of a 'loss' that radically escapes any representation. Whence the impossibility of 'mourning' it."



*Let's Play Prisoners*

Benjamin says: "we must admit that we are still unable to produce a female image or symbol that would counterbalance the monopoly of the phallus in representing desire."<sup>10</sup> Benjamin appears to be saying that if there is no symbol for loss — that is, a representation of the principle of individuation — other than the masculine one of the phallus, woman's access to power and desire will always be tenuous. In a sense woman's relationship to origins and loss is sacrificed in her role of representing those relations to man, such that her own identity — that is, her individuation in relation to her mother — remains obscure. Irigaray describes this situation with poetic force: "The problem is that, by denying the mother her generative power and by wanting to be the sole creator, the Father, according to our culture, superimposes upon the archaic world of the flesh a universe of language (langue) and symbols which cannot take root in it except as in the form of that which makes a hole in the bellies of woman and the site of their identity."<sup>11</sup>

In the Lacanian schema woman is loss, thus the paradoxical attribute of being the phallus which she cannot have. But if woman is loss, how can she represent her loss of that primary relationship — the relationship with the mother that Irigaray describes as being one of "mad desire because it is the dark continent par excellence"?<sup>12</sup> In a lucid description of Lacan's complex concept of the phallus as signifier of difference in loss, Judith Butler sheds light on Jessica Benjamin's theory of the gendering of positions of power and submission. She says "The interdependency of these positions (male 'having' the phallus and female 'being' the phallus) recalls the Hegelian structure of failed reciprocity between master and slave, in particular, the unexpected dependency of the master upon the slave in order to establish his own identity through reflection."<sup>13</sup>

The games in *Let's Play Prisoners* duplicate the dynamics of the master-slave relationship. But because the struggle occurs between girls (and by implication in a sexual relation between two women) may infer not so much that Benjamin's gendered positions of male dominance and female submission are transferable to homosexual relationships, as surely they are, but that the dependency of identity on differentiation and reflection may also be crucial to a struggle which occurs between mothers and daughters, and between women. Benjamin considers the problem of a missing symbol for woman's desire in the following manner: "The closest we have come to an image of feminine activity is motherhood and fertility. But the mother is not culturally articulated as a sexual subject, one who actually desires something for herself — quite the contrary. And once sexuality is cut loose from reproduction, once woman is no longer mother, we are at a loss for an image of woman's sexual agency."<sup>14</sup> In other words, there can be no feminine desire that is not alienated through its dependence on an exterior model. Or, as Luce Irigaray says: "The maternal function underpins the social order and the order of desire, but it is always kept in a dimension of need."<sup>15</sup> The struggle for autonomy without loss is not only complex for the female subject, but it is short circuited. The little girl encounters difficulty in differentiating herself from the mother because there is no adequate rep-

resentation of what she has lost and culturally the mother cannot provide a reflection of desire, being without any socially acknowledged desire herself. In Irigaray's words: "And if you lead me back again and again to this blind assimilation of you — but who are you? — if you turn your face from me, giving yourself to me only in an already inanimate form, abandoning me to competent men to undo my/your paralysis, I'll turn to my father. I'll leave you for someone who seems more alive than you."<sup>16</sup> This passage brings to mind a comment by Judith Butler which has interesting links to the desire between women manifest in Zando's videotape: "If Lacan presumes that female homosexuality issues from a disappointed heterosexuality, as observation is said to show, could it not be equally clear to the observer that heterosexuality issues from a disappointed homosexuality?"<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the stories recounted by Zando's performer and repeated by her childhood double, archival footage of a mother and infant from home movies is introduced at crucial moments. The memory of feeling omnipotent in the beginning of the friendship ("I thought there was something indestructible about me — I thought it was what I was") and a fantasy of trying to escape are paired with the vulnerability and dependence of a newborn baby whose tiny body is cradled in its mother's hands ("...I was a prisoner and couldn't say anything"). When she speaks of being tied up by her friend and unable to move, the image of a baby stranded on its stomach appears briefly. We see a toddler being tossed over her mother's shoulders as she recalls that she was strong but very small and that her friend would show her off to other friends. And when she tells a story about a game of trust in which she allows herself to be held limp over her friend's arms, we see a toddler released from her mother's protective grasp as she takes her first tentative steps, teetering toward an inevitable fall.

Less transparent in this narrative structure of doubling are the close-up views of two naked women touching each other which initiate *Let's Play Prisoners* and increasingly punctuate the elaboration of the stories as they are repeated. The silent interaction of female bodies seems to signal a desire that is unspoken, suppressed in language. Indeed, these sequences have a distorted, dream-like quality. The mutual grasping and stroking is erotic yet the exploratory character of these gestures and the way we as viewers are plunged into a confusing closeness with bodies that are difficult to discern in either their detail or their morphology, suggests a kind of engulfment, perhaps akin to the infant's perspective of the mother's body. Within this framework of temporal regressions and projections Zando weaves a complex web of relationships between girls, between mothers and daughters, and ultimately, between women. A poignant struggle to achieve attunement pervades the stories recounted in *Let's Play Prisoners*. As the adult performer continues to read the script describing childhood events, one of several interpretive voice-overs referring to the present rather than the past replaces her words: "One woman tries to replace power by the love that she feels for her friend. Her friend rejects love to invest herself with the power associated with control."

Together they enact what Benjamin would call a "negative cycle of recognition."

Central to these stories is the body — its vulnerability, its repression, its uncontrollable urges, its pain and its boundaries. It is the mother's prohibitions on the body, and their place in later erotic development, which are resurrected in the game which causes a disturbing rift in the girls' friendship. The two girls make a pact to hold their urine throughout the school day and then wet their pants ("We'll do it in our pants like little kids..."). They exchange knowing looks and signals of their bodily control. As the story unfolds so does the psycho-sexual nature of the struggle for recognition: "we made signs, pushed our legs together, it was *our* secret..." And when the domineering girl shares their secret with another friend, the more submissive child feels deeply betrayed. No matter what she does to win love, she must accept that her relationship is not exclusive after all. In order to elicit the intimacy and sense of abandonment experienced in this childhood humiliation, Zando urges her performer: "say it like you're lovers." The repetition of this story of waiting and going to the toilet together resumes against the background of the two naked woman silently caressing each other. The struggle between being controlled and self-control, between love, power, mutual recognition and the bodily pleasures is summed up in the submissive child's dilemma: "I was waiting to be able to go for the relief. She turned, her eyes full of excitement. I was frightened. If I didn't do what she wanted she would hate me, if I did I'd wet my pants. I couldn't and I couldn't go out without going." Another story recounted over the duration of *Let's Play Prisoners* involves the adherence to a line and the consequences of its transgression. The significance of this line is, it appears, that of sexual difference. The more assertive of the two girls decides they will cross the arbitrary yet inviolable division between the boys' and the girls' play ground. Her challenge is a specific one, that of display — a symbolic exposure of the female genitalia: she urges her more timid friend to enter the boys' play ground with her momentarily and raise their skirts, thus flaunting the taboo.

At several points in *Let's Play Prisoners* specific references to the dynamics of power are made in voice-overs. As archival footage of two little girls sharing a bath is introduced we hear: "Two women are trying to recreate their own experience. Both are powerless because they need love, because they have lost love." And shortly thereafter: "I am the girl's mother, I am allowed power and love, I have the absolute love of my child and the ability to control it." The relationship of the girlhood friends is described, yet they are referred to as adults. Against images of the performer telling her story we hear: "One woman tries to replace power by the love she feels for her friend. She is like a child because she cannot believe to be in love involves risks. The other rejects love and associates herself with power invested in control. She acts independent but she could be crushed by disapproval. Both act out of desperation as they mourn that which they have lost." And the bodies of the silent women embracing haunt these voice-overs. Zando attempts to do several things in this work, all of them pointing to the vexed question of female sexuality in a manner which suggests that the

mother-daughter relationship may have everything to do with the riddle of feminine desire. While refuting or at least circumventing the Oedipal model which relies so insistently on the phallic economy of the father, she nevertheless makes a plea for the mother, as she is defined within such an economy, to relinquish her control.

The following words appear on the screen near the beginning of Part II, "Recognition," shortly after a repetition of the story about wetting their pants — the story in which the more submissive little girl painfully refuses to play her part: "I want to sever the ties between mothers and children...between women." Surely this severing is carried out quite effectively in the workings of patriarchy. As *Let's Play Prisoners* is so clearly about desire between women, what can Zando mean by this enigmatic statement? Perhaps Irigaray's text quoted at the beginning can provide some clues: "When the one comes into the world, the other goes underground — when the one carries life, the other dies. And what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive."<sup>18</sup>

In *Let's Play Prisoners* the themes of power, loss and desire emerge in a concatenation of relationships, each repetition and doubling becoming an element in a densely woven pattern of dominance and submission. The little girls' games symbolize a mutual struggle for recognition in which desire and identity are inextricably bound. Irigaray's call for the mother to be alive is one for her to be a desiring subject. Zando's will to banish the controlling mother is one that insists, in a different way, on the legitimacy of the daughter's desire. The loss of both the desired and the desiring mother is at the heart of the crisis of identification which is dereliction.

The little girls' games may be seen as an allegory of dereliction in that they represent thwarted desires: the desire for a desiring mother, the desire for the mother's body, the desire for autonomy without loss, and the desire for the power to possess that desire through other than vicarious means.

This essay forms part of the intermagazine publishing project *The Video Issue/Propos Vidéo*, editor Renee Baert, sponsored by Satellite Video Exchange Society, Vancouver 1992-93.

*Let's Play Prisoners*, 1988, colour signal, b&w, 22 minutes  
Text & camera by Julie Zando, story by Jo Anstey  
Music by Paul Dickinson  
Canadian distributors:  
Groupe intervention Vidéo, Montreal  
V Tape, Toronto

10. Op. cit. "A Desire of One's Own," p. 83

11. Irigaray, Luce *Le corps-a-corps avec la Mère*, 1981, Montreal, Editions de la Pleine Lune — translated by David Macey in Witford, Margaret, ed., *The Irigaray Reader*, p. 41

12. Ibid. p. 35

13. Butler, Judith *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990, London & New York, Routledge, p. 44

14. Op. cit. "A Desire of One's Own," p. 83

15. Op. cit., *Corps-a-corps*..., p. 34-35

16. "And the One Doesn't Stir..." p. 62

17. Op. cit. *Gender Trouble*, p. 49

18. Op. cit. "And the One Doesn't Stir..." p. 21

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# The Body Beautiful

by Brenda Longfellow



Ngosi Onwurah's *The Body Beautiful* arrives on the crest of a wave of new black British filmmaking which has, as Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien note, transformed film culture, throwing "questions of cultural difference, identity and otherness — in a word, ethnicity — into the foreground of contestation and debate."<sup>1</sup>

Widely shown at film festivals and circulated extensively in 1991 as part of a touring package through art galleries, alternative venues and cinemathèques, films produced through Sankofa and the Black Audio Collective like *Territories*, 1984; *Handsworth Songs*, 1986; *The Passion of Remembrance*, 1987; and *Looking for Langston*, 1989, also represent a reorientation of black interventionist cinema away from the traditional mode of documentary realism. While the manner of reading the representational innovation of this work has been contentious,<sup>2</sup> the films clearly open up a new space in which the political priority of representing black history and experience is tied to an interrogation of representation itself, "foregrounded" as Mercer and Julien note, "as a practice

of selection, combination and articulation."<sup>3</sup>

I would also argue that what makes this work unique is its reformulation of the political to include questions of desire, embodied subjectivity, personal memory and sexuality in a manner that aligns the work (but does not, obviously, subsume it) with the abiding concerns and theoretical territory of feminism. Experience, that is, deployed as social and semiotic construction, becomes a critical site for rewriting the division between public and private history from the perspective of an embodied and desiring subject.

1. "De Margin and De Centre," *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 4, p. 2.

2. Judith Williamson has argued that the work has to be seen within the tradition of the avant-garde, that its formal hybridity and anti narrative strategies were precisely what determined its difference and its market ("Two Kinds of Otherness: Black Film and Avant-Garde," *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 4). Kobena Mercer countered by arguing that reading this work through the visor of Euro-American avant-garde cinema and film theory suggests: "an underlying anxiety to pin down and categorize a practice that upsets and disrupts fixed expectations and normative assumptions about what 'black' films should look like" ("Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination" in Mbye Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins, eds., *BlackFrames: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema* (MIT Press, 1988), p. 5.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

For Judith Williamson, "what is courageous...about the project is that they have chosen to speak *from* but not *for* black experience in Britain."<sup>4</sup> What is implied in that shift in preposition is that the critical goal is not to constitute a monologic portrait of an entire community, but to open up representation to the plurality and diversity in which ethnic identit(ies) are historically lived. As Paul Gilroy has argued, the move away from an essentializing "ethnic absolutism" to a more "polyphonic" concept of identity in these films marks a step toward the "necessary suggestion that black art might begin from the documentation of constructed differences within the fundamental category of blackness."<sup>5</sup> *The Body Beautiful* is structured around this premise. Produced by Channel Four for British television, the film takes the characteristic formal and political stress found in the Sankofa and Black Audio films into the highly emotionally charged terrain of reconstructed autobiography.

*The Body Beautiful* opens with a loud altercation between a mother and her adolescent daughter. The daughter runs upstairs, turns and shouts at her mother: "You never let me do anything, you titless cow." The music begins and the scene cuts to a fluid overhead shot in which a young black woman and her white mother lie naked, curled together on a bed. The overhead camera moves slowly, sensuously over their bodies to a lace-covered window as a young woman's voice begins narrating the story of her mother in a voice over:

My mother was born on November 17 1929 at Newcastle on Tyne...In 1957 she married my father, a young medical student from Nigeria. When he qualified they went to Africa...Three years later, Nigeria was ripped apart by civil war so my father sent us back to England without him. We would never live as a family again.

The scene is repeated near the end of *The Body Beautiful*, as the film moves back through history and memory to constitute a daughter's relationship to her mother. Returning to the image of the two women lying naked together, the one young, beautiful and black, the other white and scarred by the ravages of a radical mastectomy and rheumatism, the film traces a daughter's psychic and creative journey towards the mother. This highly condensed and poetic scene recalls a scene in another feminist film: Chantal Akerman's *Les Rendez-vous D'Anna*, that film too tracing the wandering of a daughter who arrives, finally, in a hotel bed with her mother. There, naked and curled up next to her mother, Anna discloses that she has begun a lesbian affair with another woman. In an earlier reading of Akerman's films, I had argued that the scene recalls an enduring fantasy in much feminist theory concerned with rewriting a hegemonic oedipal script from the perspective of a female subject.<sup>6</sup> Both Kristeva and Irigaray, for example, evoke the territory of the mother and daughter relationship as the primary psychic substratum for women and one, furthermore, whose enduring erotic attraction constitutes the possibility of an alternative economy of desire and identification. As I have argued, the mother in these scenarios is often subject to an idealization which places her outside of language and

desire, outside of any autonomous field of sexuality, not defined by her relation to the daughter.

*The Body Beautiful* retraces this psychic territory but with an important difference as the phantasy of maternal assimilation, based on the mirrored image between mother and daughter, is critically suspended by the difference between the two. What are the terms of this difference? Earlier, I had attempted to describe the scene by referring to the women as "white" and "black," the use of this opposition betraying the difficulty of elaborating a critical discourse that does not fall into the trap of repeating the manichean dualisms of racist ideology. Any such reading of the difference between the two women as an opposition between the binary terms of black and white is undermined by the autobiographical fact that the daughter is the offspring of a mixed marriage. Bearing the genetic inheritance of both races, she occupies the unstable and socially incriminating position of the in between.

This is the territory Onwurah explored in her earlier film *Coffee Coloured Children*, which documents the painful experiences suffered by a young girl and her brother because of their inability to fit into any rigidly established racial category. As the autobiographical facts of Onwurah's life refuse any discourse of racial essentialism and reveal how rigid identity categories are also constituted through "exclusion and deauthorization,"<sup>7</sup> racial difference in these films comes to be defined as the product of cultural mediation: produced both by the socially constructed look of a world which, as the voice over in *Body Beautiful* frames it, only sees in black and white and alternatively, as a kind of resistance and process of identification in which racial identity necessarily includes various forms of difference.

This "polyphonic idea of blackness," as Paul Gilroy terms it, is accompanied on the level of formal articulation by a desire to challenge the opposition between the categories of fiction and documentary which assigns the value of truth to the latter and representational distortion and invention to the former. While *The Body Beautiful* is structured around the premise of autobiography, a conventional subject of feminist documentary, neither the autobiographical subject in the film nor experience as such are represented as transparent or unified phenomena, the one functioning as the guarantee of the authenticity of the other. Onwurah, in other words, does not start from an unproblematic notion of experience as the foundation of identity but demonstrates, through the complexly orchestrated work of representation that is *The Body Beautiful*, how discourse, institutions and the social construction of the gaze mediate and determine experience as a historical process.

On the most immediate level, *The Body Beautiful*'s departure from the realist conventions of the feminist confessional documentary is signalled through the use of stylized dramatic re-enactments. In these, Onwurah's onscreen presence is conveyed through a series of actors who represent her at various stages of her life: child, adolescent and young woman. Critically, the autobiographical voice over in the film which functions as the primary structuring device is also performed by an actor (Rosie Rowell). While the first person address of this voice over, its assertion of an "I" situ-



Sian Martin in *The Body Beautiful*

ates it as a fictionalized authorial delegate, there is nothing in the text that ensures a direct or absolute conformity between the author outside the text and her fictional surrogate. Apart from the use of an actor's body and voice to represent the author in the text, the stylized marks of enunciation: the use of artificial studio space and lighting, the dramatic gestures and poses of the actors, the forceful presence of the camera and the orchestration of a compelling phantasy sequence as the psychic centre of the film, all suspend the

4. Judith Williamson, "Two Kinds of Otherness: Black Film and the Avant-Garde," *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 4.

5. Paul Gilroy, "Nothing But Sweat Inside My Hand: Diaspora Aesthetics and Black Arts in Britain," ICA Documents, no. 7; *Black Film British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1988), p. 46.

6. See my "Love Letters to the Mother: the Works of Chantal Akerman," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, vol. 13, no. 1 & 2, 1989, pp. 73-91.

7. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations," *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge Press, 1992), p. 13.

authenticity of the autobiographical subject.

I would argue that the separation the film effects between the speaking voice of the narrational subject and any attribution of authenticity is what makes *The Body Beautiful* so distinctive. While the first person testimonial address of much feminist documentary which has been rightfully interpreted as a crucial political intervention in "giving voice," "naming" and representing women as speaking subjects,<sup>8</sup> the question remains as to what kind of subject is being represented by these tactics. What is significant about *The Body Beautiful* is that the strategy of autobiographical narration is appropriated but reframed and represented as a process of self-fashioning and revision within language. Here the voice functions not as the fully self-present guarantee of the homogeneity and truth of the speaking subject but precisely as the textual cause of its division. Finally unanchored in any definitive bodily presence, the voice remains near to the grain, a writerly voice that constructs and revises the history of a subject without ever fully occupying that position.

This division of the autobiographical subject is most obviously conveyed through the radical disjuncture in the film between sound and image. Refusing all but the most minimal instances of synchronicity, image and sound function as two distinct signifying registers and two distinct temporalities. While the images function in a minimal and metonymic fashion to evoke a series of condensed memories and past events, the voice of the autobiographical narrator is located very much in the present as a discourse of retrospection, analysis and interpretation. It is this retrospective quality of the voice that locates it as the site where the autobiographical subject revises her historical narrative in relation to the historical narrativization of the mother. The autobiographical subject in *The Body Beautiful* thus only comes into representation through the reconstitution of a relationship and dialogue with an other — in this case — with the mother.

This dialogic quality of the film is conveyed through the uncanny presence of the director's mother, Madge Onwurah, who plays herself and whose voice, speaking the lyrical text written by the daughter, functions as a complementary narrator, joining the fictionalized voice of the daughter in a dialogic exchange. Here the mother is present, not as an idealized figure in the daughter's phantasy but as a subject "in her own right," a desiring subject. As such, the entire film might be seen as an act of reparation that seeks to recognize the mother as different and desiring, that endeavours to remember for the mother, to give the mother a voice in a culture that habitually casts her on the side of invisibility and silence.

While it is a recognition of difference which grounds the daughter's acknowledgement of the mother's status as desiring subject, this difference is not only organized around the particularities of racial identification, but is read in relation to the specular regime of a sexist culture in which women's worth and desirability is assigned according to rigid categories of body type. Again, the autobiographical narration functions in a critical fashion to frame specularly and to suspend the immediate lure of the image. While this

framing of specularly comes to be most obviously tied to an interrogation of the role of woman as erotic spectacle, it is also implicitly addressed to that specular regime of racist ideology which "only sees in black and white."<sup>9</sup> Specularity, in fact, the film seems to argue, is the very medium through which rigid categories of identity and difference are assigned through the social and institutional organization of the gaze.

What is represented as the difference between mother and daughter in *The Body Beautiful* resides critically in the fact that the mother suffers a complete mastectomy and the ravages of rheumatism, that her body is scarred and crippled, radically excised from the field of what patriarchal culture defines as desirable. The mastectomy represents the most unbearable loss, not only for the mother but for the daughter. The scar which stands as a vivid testimony of loss and disfigurement is linked metonymically to the series of losses which determines the daughter's relation to the mother: the loss of the father and of a country, the loss of economic and class privilege.

The mother's disfigurement and consequent sexual invisibility is radically contrasted with the daughter's ability to attract the male look, here represented through the apparatus of fashion photography. As a montage of fashion shots features a series of models on the runway, with the Ngosi character in centre frame, the voice over informs us that she began modelling at sixteen: "It was fun, it paid well and I got to travel." The sequence cuts to an outdoor shot in front of a rushing brook run through with stark jagged rocks. The Ngosi character, draped in a haute couture red velvet creation poses dramatically as a male fashion photographer shouts instructions, arranges her body and proceeds to photograph her. The mother's voice over begins: "I had given birth to the model daughter. I watched as she joined that elite breed of women pencilled in by men who define a sliding scale of beauty that stops at women like me." The sequence ends with a close up reflection of the model daughter's face in a lens which slowly dissolves into a close up of the mother's face. The shot cuts to the image of the mother standing, incongruously, in the same location, staring into the camera as we hear in voice over: "Somewhere between the mastectomy and the rheumatism, I had been neutered."

Each of the memory enactments following this sequence are organized around a foregrounding and orchestration of a look. While the look in the fashion shoot sequence stands as a metonym for the regime of specularly where woman figures as commodified object and, as Laura Mulvey coined it, "the erotic spectacle par excellence," that characteristic of the look becomes mediated in other sequences. This is particularly the case in the pivotal scene where Ngosi, after admonishing her mother "not to be so uptight," convinces her mother to join her in a sauna. As the camera pans around the steam-filled room, revealing women with all shapes and sizes of breasts, it pauses on Madge Onwurah, who has fallen asleep, her towel sliding down to reveal the scar on her breast. As Ngosi observes, the other women all look at her mother then quickly look away. Their look, while it might also be a look of sympathy, also conveys a

certain disgust which aligns it with the look of that specular regime which defines women's desirability and hence, their visibility, according to standards of youth, able bodiedness, slimness, wholeness...etc. It is the mediation of this look through the look of the other women that strikes Ngosi, her mother's "womanliness" only becoming apparent to her "under erasure," as lack, through the censoring look of the other. "I remember that day in the sauna," she observes in voice over, "as the first time my mother appeared before me as a woman. I was forced to see her as others might."

This recognition is followed by what I have argued is the psychic and dramatic centre of the film: a phantasy sequence that the daughter orchestrates and presents to the mother as the most special of all gifts. The sequence begins in a cafeteria/poolhall where the two women are having tea. A tall, young black man is playing pool and kidding with his mates about the "pair of fried eggs" he had the night before. Through a series of looks: Ngosi in close up staring at the young man; the young man in close up looking in her direction; the mother in medium shot who looks at the young man then turns to look at her daughter staring towards him, the erotic phantasy is initiated and mediated through the look of the daughter. A final close up of the young man cuts to a similar close up in which the mother's hand enters to caress his face as she states in voice over: "A single caress from him would smooth out the deformities, give me back the right to be desired for my body, and not in spite of it. A forbidden phantasy, with no beginning..." A close up series of caresses ends with a long shot of the young man and Madge Onwurah naked, holding each other in a studio setting filled with hanging gauze sheets and candles. As the young man picks up the mother, carries her to the bed and begins making love with her, the camera suddenly cuts to the Ngosi character, tarted up like a model, who, observing this primal scene, giggles and laughs like a child. I'm not sure how to interpret this giggle. Is she laughing at her own ingenuity in constructing this scene which defies societal taboos of miscegenation and ageism? Or is the laughter that of the child, excluded from the primal scene, who laughs at the improbability of the mother's sexuality? Perhaps what the giggle finally reveals are the daughter's conflictual feelings around her brazen defiance of patriarchal norms of sexual propriety. Framed by this return of the repressed (for what is the giggle if not a sign of the proximity to repressed material?), the phantasy sequence rewrites the conventional oedipal script with a dashing difference. While the primal scene in psychoanalysis is scripted from the point of view of the male child whose sighting of parental coitus inspires him with castration anxiety, the scene in *The Body Beautiful* is organized around the great lacunae in classic psychoanalysis: the desire of the mother. In this rewriting, loss is displaced from the phallic term and located precisely at the level of social institutions and the gaze which excise the mother from the field of desirability.

The textual density of the scene builds as a close up shot features Ngosi yelling in synch into the camera: "Touch her, you bastard." The sequence cuts back to the phantasy scene where Ngosi's hands enter frame to grab the man's hand and hold it on top of the mother's scarred breast, as if to

force a recognition of the desirability of the mother's disfigurement and loss, as if to force him to make up for and repair the damage inflicted on the mother.

The film ends where it began, with an overhead shot of the two women lying naked in bed together, a return to origins but with a difference. That difference involves the protracted recognition of the mother's sexuality and the conflicted orchestration of a phantasy that would restore her right to be desired. Lying naked, their differences are visually recorded and yet suspended by the daughter's narration which testifies to the strength and endurance of the emotional bond between them which traverses their differences:

A child is made in its parent's image. But to a world which only sees in black and white, I was only made in the image of my father. And yet, she has molded me, created the curves and contours of my life, coloured the innermost details of my being. She has fought for me, protected me with every crooked bone in her body. She lives inside me and cannot be separated. I may not be reflected in her image but my mother is mirrored in my soul. I am my mother's daughter for the rest of my life.

Mae Gwendolyn Henderson has observed that:

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic character, reflecting not only a relationship with the "other(s)," but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity.<sup>10</sup>

A more fitting description of *The Body Beautiful* could not be found. Rich in its textual density, the film traces the constitution of an autobiographical subject through an interlocutory and dialogic relation with the mother. Within the context of that dialogic structure, the autobiographical subject is not given as a stable entity, unified throughout time, but as an immutable process, subject to the particular and idiosyncratic effects of history and to the possibilities of change and revision. Along the way a novel conception of black female subjectivity emerges in which identity is defined, not in relation to a singular ontology of race or gender but in relation to a multiple dialogic of differences (intergenerational, intraracial and intercultural) where difference, as Trinh T. Minh-ha observes: "is that which undermines the very idea of identity, deferring to infinity the layers whose totality forms 'I'..."<sup>11</sup>

8. See Julia Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics of Feminist Documentary Film," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Fall 1978).

9. As Homi Bhabha has pointed out, colonial discourse is precisely maintained by an ideology of the specular in which the colonised is produced as a fixed reality "at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible. ...It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to Realism." "The Other Question — the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6, (November/December 1983).

10. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 145.

11. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, op. cit. pp. 89, 96.



Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis  
in *Thelma and Louise*

## Pearl, Hilda, Thelma & Louise

THE "WOMAN'S FILM" REVISITED

"We believed that women might lead their  
lives with the same freedom that men do".

(Hilda Crane, 1956)

by Susan Morrison

The release and subsequent box-office success of Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991) has provoked much heated debate in both public and private spaces with regards to its positioning as a politically correct representation of contemporary values. One issue is the question as to whether the film merely substitutes female 'buddies' for male ones in an otherwise conventional and regressive road movie; or if, indeed, *Thelma and Louise* can be read as a potentially progressive film which serves to open up possibilities for female protagonists and feminist<sup>1</sup> viewers. This article is the result of one such on-going discussion with an otherwise enlightened friend who could only see the film in the former manner. As such, it is an attempt

to bring together a number of ideas and observations whose purpose is to situate *Thelma and Louise* clearly within the latter mode.

In order to effect a positive reading of *Thelma and Louise*, it is first necessary to shift the generic categories in which and through which we understand the film. While most reviewers took the film as a female variation on the 'road movie' ('Two women riding around in a '66 Thunderbird', as the Globe and Mail TV guide recently described it), I want to propose as an alternative that it be looked at as a 'Woman's Film'. By locating *Thelma and Louise* within a historical trajectory of films whose purposes and premises have been well theorized by contemporary feminist writers, I hope to shed some light on its narrative practices, especially with regards to what some see as a serious weakness: its unhappy ending.<sup>2</sup>

### The Woman's Film

DURING THE 1940's, the genre category of 'Woman's Films' arose as a kind of sub-category of the everpopular bourgeois melodrama. Within cinematic history, there have always been films intended primarily for female spectators. The heyday of the Woman's Film, however, is commonly held to be the '40's and '50's, when an inordinately large number of them were produced and distributed by the Hollywood studios<sup>3</sup>. In retrospect, it is likely that the single most important determining instance for this was economic. The outbreak of World War II removed much of the male population overseas, leaving the women behind as the major consumers of Hollywood's products. After the war ended, the Woman's Film continued in popularity until well into the '50's, when the burgeoning television industry dealt a crippling blow to Hollywood, and soap operas superseded the Woman's Film.

Traditionally denigrated by most critics as devoid of any redeeming merit, the Woman's Film has been recuperated as an object of cultural value by feminists who see in the genre a means for analysing and understanding just how women are positioned and addressed by the dominant ideology through films in general, and the Woman's Film, in particular<sup>4</sup>. These films have provided a rich source of material for writers whose interest is to bracket and render opaque the transparent assumptions underlying those moralizing narratives peculiar to Woman's Films. Directed to women, but rarely by them, these films entertained, superficially, while beneath the surface they laid out rigid guidelines which informed women as to the correct path to take, the right choice to make.

Generically speaking, a Woman's Film, first and foremost, must have a female protagonist at its centre, and take a female point-of-view. (These are not necessarily synonymous, however, for certain films can have a woman as primary focus, yet, by fixing her as a spectacle for the male viewer, prevent the female in the audience from forming a close identification.) In addition, what is most characteristic of the Woman's Film is the overwhelming motivation of its narrative by certain thematic concerns. The narrative structure revolves around the female protagonist's quest for happiness, a quest played out thematically around issues of sex-

uality, marriage, the family, and independence. What the majority of these female protagonists quickly discover, however, is that in the patriarchal society of their diegetic world, there is no place for an active, independent woman. Played out in countless variations across the decades, it is, time and again, only through renunciation and sacrifice that they achieve their ultimate goal; indeed, have any hope of achieving it. Those women who refuse to forego their active desires in effect refuse the possibility of recuperation. Consequently, they almost always are punished by a kind of filmic moral trajectory that brings a double closure, to the woman's life and to the film's narrative. This is not to imply that the cinema is not fascinated with 'bad' women; only that it makes sure that they are not rewarded for their 'crimes' against society.

IN ORDER TO REPRESENT *Thelma and Louise* as a Woman's film, I am going to set it in relation to two earlier films, the first from the genre's classic period, King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* from 1946; and the second, Philip Dunne's much underrated *Hilda Crane*, made ten years later in 1956. My purpose here is to underline those features that all three films have in common, with emphasis on the ways in which each film problematizes issues of female sexuality. Then, using the earlier films as precedents, I will examine the nature and function of the ending of *Thelma and Louise* in order to claim it as typical in its inevitability yet progressive in its strategies.

### 1. *Duel in the Sun*

EVEN THOUGH THERE HAS BEEN a fair amount written on it, King Vidor's 1946 film *Duel in the Sun* will serve as my first example as it provides an excellent foil for the other films. Like *Thelma and Louise* some forty-five years later, *Duel in*

1. I am deliberately splitting the distinction here between female and feminist in order to include within the latter category those male viewers who can identify with female protagonists. While most women have, out of necessity, acquired the ability to cross-identify (the majority of films having male protagonists, the majority of images in our culture presenting female bodies for male eyes), many men have not. cf Mary Ann Doane, 'The Desire to Desire' pp 1-37 in *The Desire to Desire*, Indiana University Press, (1987)

2. *Thelma and Louise* is a film rich in invention and strategy. I can not do it full justice in the course of this paper, which, for expediency's sake, must be limited to the issue mentioned above. However, another aspect worth examining in the historical light of the Woman's Film is *Thelma and Louise's* use of male stereotypes. The obnoxious trucker whose vehicle gets blown up, and the highway cop who gets locked in his trunk are broadly drawn caricatures which represent condensations of all the sexist slob and fascist pigs against whom women have found themselves helpless. While this serves to heighten the emotional response of the women in the audience, it may be queried by some men who don't get the point.

3. e.g. Variety's capsule description for *Hilda Crane* reads, "Soap Opera pitched to wide screen and femme audience".

4. See, for example, Screen Vol. 25, Number 1, Jan-Feb. (1984) 'Melodrama: The Story continues...'; Mary Ann Doane *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* Indiana University press (1987); Christine Gledhill ed. *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* BFI Publishing, 1987; Marcia Landy ed. *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama* Wayne State University Press (1991).

the *Sun* is an instance of a traditional masculine genre—here, the Western—being transformed/subverted into a Woman's film by its having a female protagonist at its centre and women's concerns as its motivating structure<sup>5</sup>. Pearl Chavez, the protagonist, is a 'half-breed' torn between her father's dying wish that she become a 'lady' i.e. repress her sexual desires in order to fit into respectable society, and her own natural instincts to lead a sexually active life. The options are figured by two brothers: Jesse, the 'good' one, a solid upright member of society; and Lewt, the 'bad' one, whose wild ways take him outside the law. While Jesse is not necessarily characterised by the narrative as a prig, it is apparent that for him, female sexuality is foreclosed within marriage. Pearl finds herself inevitably drawn towards Lewt, even though she knows/ society demands that he is the 'wrong choice'. Her quest for respectability through marriage is foiled twice; first when Jesse chooses someone else, a 'good' woman, as his wife, and second, when Lewt murders the well-meaning Sam on the eve of his impending marriage to Pearl. The climax of the film entails an amazing scene set in the barren western hills. Pearl has ridden out to find Lewt, determined to avenge Sam's death and Jesse's injuries. In an extended shoot-out, Pearl and Lewt mortally wound each other; then, both, having fallen, crawl towards each other to die in a last (not quite-managed) embrace.

## 2. *Hilda Crane*

WHILE IT COMES at the tail end of the classic period for Hollywood melodramas, *Hilda Crane* nevertheless is one of the most interesting of its kind, and deserves more recognition than it has received. Although the film lacks the mesmerising stylistic features which have endeared so many of the fifties melodramas to film critics, Dunne's film makes up for this by virtue of its exceptionally well-written script by Samson Raphaelson. The intelligent level and appeal of the dialogue bears witness to its author's credentials as writer for Ernst Lubitsch's sophisticated comedies from the 'thirties and 'forties<sup>6</sup>.

*Hilda Crane* begins with its eponymous protagonist's arrival back in her home town of Winona, Nevada, after two failed marriages and an unsuccessful career in New York City. Hilda's lament is that her late father had encouraged her to be independent and active, convincing her that she could 'live like a man and still be a woman'. While his advice to her had been to 'get a job, pay her own way, and lick the world', what her New York experience proved was that that was not really an option open to her as a woman. In her desire for independence, Hilda only became even more dependent on a succession of men. Her return to Winona is an attempt to start over, to do it her mother's way rather than her father's. Mrs. Crane's version of a woman's life, in contrast to her husband's, is one of acceptance of the passive position. For her, decency and respectability are the highest virtues to which a woman can attain. In response to Hilda's quest for romantic love, her mother pragmatically claims that most women outgrow it. Instead, she suggests that they learn to 'put up appearances', which in the end, is more satisfying.

The film's narrative describes a tension between these

two positions as characterized by Hilda's relationship with two men: Russell Burns, a 'mother-approved' self-made successful builder; and Jacques Delisle, a professor of French with whom she had had a romantic fling while at university. Russell, who is portrayed as a very decent character, proposes marriage; Jacques, who is definitely not a nice man, proposes a continuation of their affair. While Hilda states repeatedly throughout the film that she does not love Russell, his offer of marriage implies a chance for her to gain that which she has lacked; a husband, a family, a home. Russell's mother, a curmudgeonly old battle-axe, disapproves of Hilda precisely because of her previous 'sexually free' behavior. To Mrs. Burns, Hilda is nothing but a 'dirty little tramp'.. an opinion with which we presently discover her own mother concurs. But Hilda finds that Jacques' opinion of her is just as unacceptable. He crushes her father-nurtured fantasy of the possibility of a free and equal relationship between the sexes by expressing his idealization of Hilda as a 'grand courtesan' in the French Renaissance tradition. Tramp or courtesan?—these are the only descriptors available, she discovers, when a woman tries to live her life with the (sexual) freedom society gives freely to men.

Throughout the film, Hilda acts only on the rebound. She marries Russell as a counter to Jacques' characterization of her as a courtesan/tramp. After Mrs. Burns' heart attack and death brought on by the wedding, Russell and Hilda are distanced from each other. Rather than move into a home of their own, they remain in Mrs. Burns mansion, and Hilda turns to alcohol for consolation. When Russell rejects her wish to accompany him on a business trip, she seeks out Jacques, and ends up spending the night with him. On his return, Russell goes to Jacques' hotel room, where, finding the two together, he sends Hilda home, and slugs Jacques. At home, Hilda's mother berates her for her outrageous behavior, and Hilda swallows a bottle of sleeping pills in an attempt to find peace at last. In the end, she is saved by Russell, who realizes his past insensitivity to her unhappiness. He puts away all traces of his mother's presence, especially a large oil portrait that had dominated the living room as her death had dominated their married life, and asks her for forgiveness. Russell takes Hilda to the building site where their dream house has stood, unfinished, for the five months since Mrs. Burns' death. When Hilda sees that Russell has had the house completed, she understands the symbolic message implied, and they embrace.

## 3. *Thelma and Louise*

MY INTENTION HERE is not so much to recount the narrative of *Thelma and Louise*—I am taking it for granted that most readers will have seen the film—as to read it through a particular perspective, that of the Woman's Film. *Thelma and Louise* shares with the typical Woman's film a female protagonist—two, in fact: Thelma, a stunningly attractive, but very naive young housewife; and Louise, a somewhat older, more experienced woman who, although unmarried, has a steady boy friend, and works as a waitress. The film's plot is delivered from their point-of-view. It opens with their planning a fishing weekend together, away from the

city and its relationships. Thelma's marriage is exposed from the beginning as oppressive, with Daryl, her husband, treating her like a helpless child. She is afraid to tell him that she wants to go away with Louise, for fear he will say no. Thelma packs (including a gun in her travel kit) and departs, leaving Daryl a note. Up to this point, the women have no reason to believe that they are *not* heading for a wonderful weekend vacation. What happens when they stop at The Silver Bullet, a restaurant/dancehall, for something to eat proves them to be under a delusion concerning their actual freedom to act as they wish, do what they want. Thelma's desire to have a good time away from Daryl and his authoritarian constraints results in an attempted rape in the parking lot by Harlan, a man with whom she's been dancing. Louise appears with the gun in time to stop him from actually raping Thelma; when dismissed and insulted by Harlan in demeaning sexist language, she uses the gun to kill him. Where one would expect that the two women would go to the police to explain what had occurred, Louise refuses, telling Thelma that the police would not believe that the two women had acted in self-defense. Much later in the film, we discover that Louise spoke from personal experience, as, years earlier, she had been raped in Texas and the police had done nothing.

From this point on, they are on the run, from the law and from their previous law-abiding lives. Louise decides that they will flee to Mexico, and calls her boyfriend Jimmy to obtain the necessary cash. On the way to the appointed

delivery place, Thelma picks up a young man, J.D., a 'cowboy', who hitches a ride with them. At the motel, Louise's boyfriend proposes marriage—an offer that she would have been overjoyed by prior to this occasion, but which, she now realises, is out of the question. They spend the night together, as do Thelma and J.D., who initiates Thelma into the joys and pleasures of sex—something she obviously missed out on with Daryl. At breakfast the next morning, Louise discovers that Thelma has left all the money in the same room as J.D.; when they rush there, both the money and the cowboy have disappeared.

This is the second momentous occasion in the film, for it signifies the loss of hope for escape. Without money, they cannot travel to Mexico. It also witnesses the sensible Louise's crumbling under the psychological pressures caused by their seemingly unending bad luck. However, it also transforms Thelma from an innocent who is constantly being taken advantage of, to a woman who takes things into her own hands. In order to obtain the necessary funds for their escape, she decides to rob a grocery store, using the polite technique taught her by J.D.

5. For an in-depth analysis of *Duel in the Sun* with regards to the relationship between ideological effects and its protagonist's gender, see an earlier article I wrote on this topic, "The (Ideo)logical Consequences of Gender on Genre" *CineAction!* 13/14 (August 1988) pp. 40-45.

6. Among Raphaelson's screen credits are *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *The Merry Widow* (1934), *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), and *Heaven Can Wait* (1943).

Brad Pitt and Geena Davis in *Thelma and Louise*



This armed robbery marks out a moral shift in the trajectory of the film, from the audience holding out the possibility of these two eminently likable and engaging women being pardoned for 'justifiable' murder, to the certain knowledge that they will have to pay for the second crime. The parallel narrative detailing the activities of the Arkansas police and FBI as they try to catch up with Thelma and Louise foregrounds the inevitability of the outcome of the story. Even with a sympathetic police investigator voicing his concern, the audience knows that too much is going against them for them to be able to get away. In the end, at the top of a mountain range, surrounded by what appear to be hundreds of police officers aiming their rifles at the two women, Thelma and Louise choose to commit suicide rather than surrender. Embracing each other, then with hands clasped tightly together, Thelma and Louise drive the car off the edge of the cliff to certain death.

### What Does a Woman Want?

THE THEMATIC CONCERNS FOREGROUNDED in Woman's Films, i.e. sexuality, marriage, the family and independence, all relate to the ways women are positioned in society insofar as their lives are circumscribed by issues of home, husband, and family. The protagonists of the three films under discussion, Pearl, Hilda, Thelma and Louise, may be jointly characterized as women who choose, have chosen, or end up choosing to live outside the socially framed parameters of middle class morality precisely because they think that they can determine their own lives. (It is no coincidence that none of the women has children. That would have shifted the emphasis from issues of social and sexual independence to those of maternal responsibility, a shift which would surely have forfeited the audience's sympathy claimed by these films for their protagonists<sup>7</sup>.) Thus each film's narrative is constructed from the conflict produced by its protagonist's quest for personal happiness. What will make her happy (self-determination) turns out to be in direct conflict with what will make society happy (containment within prescribed conventions, whether marriage or bourgeois respectability). Consequently, each of the three filmic narratives describes the tensions involved in their protagonists making the socially sanctioned 'right' choice, and each film's ending constitutes a social response to its protagonists' final decision. The female protagonists (and the women in the audience) discover that the right choice leads to a happy ending, while the wrong one inevitably results in an unhappy ending.

However, what I would like to suggest is that *Duel in the Sun*, *Hilda Crane* and *Thelma and Louise* problematize their endings, whether happy or unhappy, a feature which enables, even encourages an alternate, inverse reading. In doing this, these films expose the contradictions inherent in those Hollywood endings which seek to provide clear solutions to all problems. While the two earlier films, *Duel in the Sun* and *Hilda Crane*, do this unconsciously i.e., the mechanisms for conversion are not immediately apparent, (and may be, I am willing to admit, quite possibly the function of a contemporary feminist 'reading onto' of the text,) I believe that in *Thelma and Louise*, the device is both ironic and conscious.

In *Duel in the Sun*, Pearl tries to conform to the dictates of respectable society, to control herself by repressing her natural desire for Lewt. But she can't resist the temptation that he represents; that of an unregulated passionate relationship. Pearl's choice of Lewt over Jesse, even though thrust on her by circumstance, seals her fate. In a characteristic Woman's Film kind of justice, Pearl is ultimately punished for her wrong choice. *Duel in the Sun* performs the pedagogical function of demonstrating what happens when the wrong choice is made, when the female protagonist can't contain her sexuality in a socially sanctioned way. The only possible outcome is punishment by death.

What is curious here, however, is the way in which the ending, at the same time, configures death as a fulfillment of Pearl's desire. She doesn't just die; she dies in the arms of the man she loved but couldn't have! We might say that she thereby finds happiness through eternal union with Lewt. For the primed (female) audience, the inevitable sadness and tears elicited by Pearl's death are mediated by her final emancipation from society's constraints. In death, Pearl achieved what she couldn't have in life. In Pearl's transcendence of death, the audience achieves what it can't have in real life; an alleviation (albeit imaginary) of the social restraints on women which compel them to live within narrowly defined limits<sup>8</sup>.

Hilda Crane's mistakes were made prior to the film's beginning; two bad marriages and a failed career inspired by her fathers' encouragement of her independence. The narrative of *Hilda Crane* works to eventually fold her back into society's good graces by having her reject, in the end, the role of 'tramp', for that of 'housewife'. Because the film does not hide the fact that she loves Jacques and not Russell, her decision can be read as based not on love but on positioning. Given the two choices, she realizes and responds to the moral weight brought to bear against a woman's sexuality outside of the sanction of marriage. Consequently, Hilda, unlike Pearl, is rewarded with a 'happy ending'; the promise of a successful marriage, her own home, and children. But just as in *Duel in the Sun*, the ending can be seen as problematized. Since Hilda has affirmed throughout the film that it's not Russell but Jacques whom she loves, an ending in which she settles for the former can only foreground the contradiction inherent in this so-called 'happy ending'. Has she not in fact, truly taken her mother's view that it is appearance that matters? Hasn't Hilda ultimately exchanged her desire for independence for the security of 'three square meals a day and love once a month', as she once cynically observed? In other words, what kind of happy ending is this, anyway?

As outlined above, both of the earlier films have endings which provide 'morally correct' terminations to narratives dealing with the expression of female independence and sexuality within bourgeois society. While neither *Duel in the Sun* nor *Hilda Crane* consciously presents a positive and progressive alternative to the traditional conclusions of the Woman's Film, I have tried to indicate that both films are more than mere expressions of their problems. By enabling, if not inviting, us to question the logic of their endings, they

initiate and encourage the questioning of the conventions of the genre (and by extension society) through a critical distancing.

It is my contention that the narrative concerns and strategies of *Thelma and Louise* fit into the same pattern, with its ending as inevitable and unavoidable as the earlier ones. The emphasis in this film, as in *Duel in the Sun* and *Hilda Crane*, is on female sexuality and independence. *Thelma and Louise* takes as its main concern female independence as expressed through the right of women to determine their own (sexual) freedom. This is expressed on many occasions and in many ways throughout the course of the film. Visually, for example, it's coded in the way the two women are pictured. At the beginning of the film, they are both concerned with the way they look 'for men'. Thelma wears a long, white, frilly dress, with lots of lipstick and eye make-up, while Louise is neatly dressed in a jeans outfit, a head scarf protecting her hair from the dust and wind of convertible travel. She, too, wears bright lipstick and carefully applied makeup. As the film progresses, their appearances are gradually transformed, with Louise, at one point, symbolically tossing away her lipstick. By the film's end, having rejected male companionship, the two women have come to adopt a similar appearance insofar as they both wear jeans, loose naturally tousled hair and no makeup.

The incident which starts the fateful action in *Thelma and Louise* is Thelma's innocent belief that she can have a good time dancing with a man without there being further implications. But the underlying cause which motivates Thelma's behaviour is her relationship with her husband, Daryl, a relationship which may be described as more father-daughter than husband-wife. During the course of the film, she develops from a helpless child-like woman into a mature, self-sufficient and decisive individual. Moreover, she is liberated both psychologically and sexually from dependence on her husband/father. Louise, too, is transformed over the film's narrative length. While much more independent than Thelma, she originally initiated the weekend as a strategy to get back at her boyfriend Jimmy for taking their relationship for granted. Her transformation is marked out by her realisation that marriage will not solve her problems, either the immediate ones or more long-term ones.

On several occasions, *Thelma and Louise* is punctuated with shots of the two fugitives driving across vast stretches of magnificent landscape. The dialogue and looks exchanged by Thelma and Louise on these occasions indicate their recognition of the symbolic correlation between the openness and awesomeness of the setting, and the freedom and pleasure which they have achieved by their escape into it. It is in fact very appropriate that the final scene places them literally at the edge of the Grand Canyon, a romantic metaphor in American life for the freedom of untrammelled nature in contrast to the constraints of civilized life.

As in *Duel in the Sun*, the protagonists in *Thelma and Louise* cannot escape the consequences of their choice to go against society's dictates. There is no other option for them; neither Thelma nor Louise is willing to surrender to certain

condemnation and incarceration. As with *Duel in the Sun*, however, the decision to choose death rather than give in to society's dictates can be read as a victory rather than defeat. For Thelma and Louise, self-determination is more important and more emancipatory than life itself. The look they exchange before they drive off the cliff is one of happiness, not despair. In death, they achieve the freedom of self-determination that was denied them in life.

*Thelma and Louise* self-consciously mediates the tragedy of its ending by employing two filmic devices which soften the blow to the audience's emotional identification with the two women. First, the shot of their car going off the cliff is freeze-framed while the car is in mid-air; we don't see the actual crash. Also, immediately afterwards, clips from earlier scenes are projected while the credits are rolling, clips which show Thelma and Louise very much alive and well. What these devices accomplish is to enable the protagonists to transcend the limitations of mortality in a kind of heavenly assumption into (feminist)legend.

While *Duel in the Sun* offered a similarly transcendent ending, what makes *Thelma and Louise* so different from the 1940's film is the way in which it consciously insists on the audience's response to its unhappy ending in the form of reflection on the nature of its cause. To understand the reasons for the endings of Woman's films, we must look at what caused them, i.e. the wrong choice made by the woman. In *Duel in the Sun*, Pearl aligns herself with Lewt, and thus suffers the consequences. In *Thelma and Louise*, Thelma tries to have a good time away from her husband, and is severely punished for it. Where the earlier audience might not have questioned the protagonist's punishment, the contemporary audience wonders at the moral involved here. Can it be (as some have argued) that the message is that women should not go into bars by themselves, for awful things will happen if they do? The tragedy of the film is that Thelma should have been perfectly free to enjoy herself in that bar. She did not make the wrong choice. It was the society in which she/we live that permitted Harlan to feel that he could do anything he wanted and get away with it.

Thus, reflection on *Thelma and Louise* exposes the wrongs in society, not in the protagonist's decision. In this way, it can be seen as a progressive, because critical, film, rather than one which merely confirms/affirms the status quo. Because of this, it stands as an important addition to the feminist canon of films about women.

7. In Margarethe von Trotta's *Marianne and Julianne*, for example, a film which on one level debates the comparative extent of anti-government political involvement adopted by two German sisters, the narrative is further complicated by the fact that the extremist revolutionary sister has a young son whom she abandons to devote herself entirely to the cause. The result is that the audience's sympathy (and identification) is aligned with the more moderate sister who, by the film's end, takes on the responsibility of caring for the child.

8. Pearl's transcendence over death is reinforced and prefigured in the opening sequence of the film. A panoramic view of the western plains comes to focus on a yellow flower growing in the hilly landscape. While the voice-over narration states that no-one knows where Pearl is buried, the visuals imply that the flower is growing from her grave and therefore represents a metamorphosis in the Greek mythological tradition e.g. Narcissus and Daphne.

by Carol Moore  
and Geoff Miles

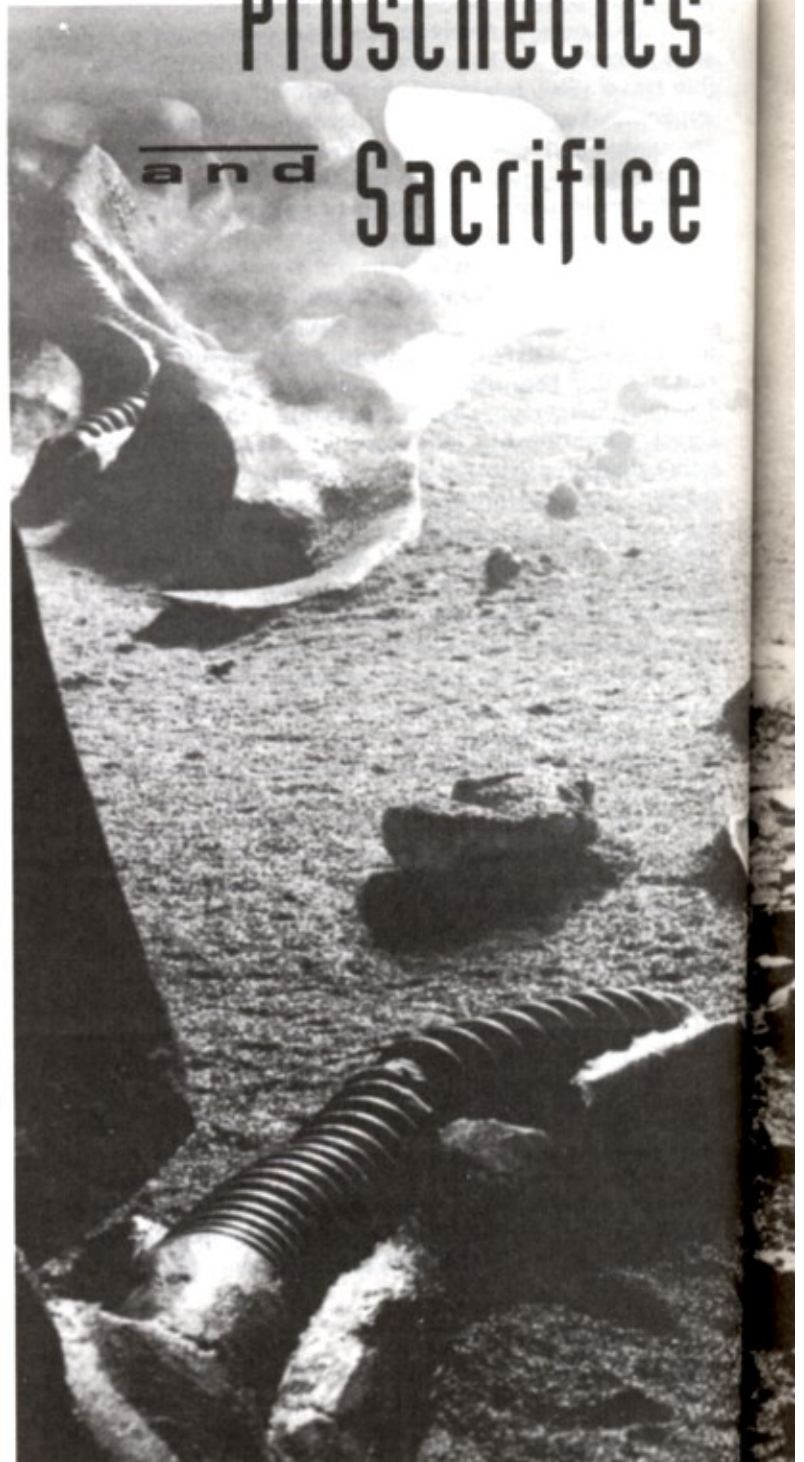
*Klein's theory of phantasies makes clear infantile mythology about the inside of the mother's body as the first labyrinth or stage of the infantile odyssey into separation. Also, the mother's body is the dream screen and the scaffolding for mythology. Thus, the mother's body as well as the bodily zones is a staging for much of the infant's mental life...*

Jane Silverman Van Buren  
*The Modernist Madonna*

*One recalls Tausk's hypothesis that the paranoid schizophrenic may project the skewed sense of his own body into the crazy design of the "influencing machine." Such distortions are likely to be extreme elaborations of the early body percepts of self and "other." The uncanny feelings aroused by the derelict [alien ship's] great innards may likewise be rooted in infantile, oceanic impressions of one's body and of the immense, ineffably mysterious physicality of nurturing adults.*

Harvey R. Greenberg  
*"The Fractures of Desire"*

# Explorations, Prosthetics and Sacrifice

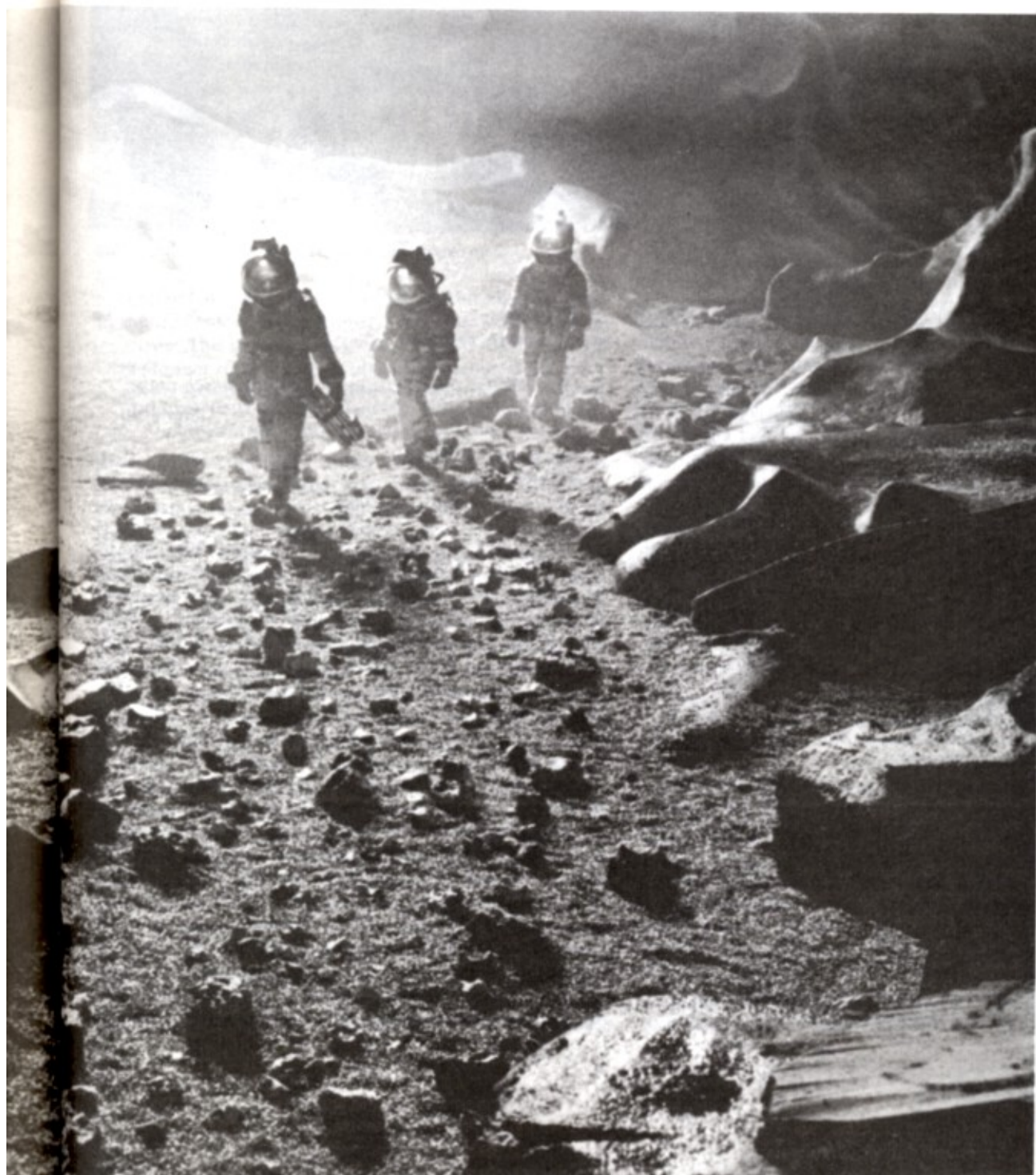


In a paper recently delivered at the Tenth Annual *Theory, Culture, and Society* conference, Leslie Caldwell drew attention to the fact that whereas neuroses and the Oedipus complex — especially in their Freudian and Lacanian formulations — have been taken for granted in literary theory and cultural criticism, the structures of psychosis and archaic, pre-oedipal psychical development have not enjoyed a similar degree of interest and deployment.<sup>1</sup> Certainly some exceptions should be noted in making such a statement, in particular the work of some French feminist psychoanalytic theoreticians, i.e., Kristeva, Irigaray; the schizo-analysis of Deleuze and Guattari; and some of the work of North

American feminist object relations theorists, especially Dinnerstein with her use of Kleinian theory.

In this paper, we will show that Klein's work can be fruitfully deployed when examining the existence of unconscious maternal structures in the *Alien* trilogy. In particular let us note the importance of Klein's formulations of the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position, the primacy of the infant's use of phantasy in constructing both its internal world and its knowledge and understanding of

1. Leslie Caldwell, "The Two Freud's," unpublished paper presented at the Tenth Annual *Theory, Culture, and Society* International Conference, Seven Springs, Pennsylvania, August 17, 1992.



The three astronauts make their way across the uncharted planet in *Alien*



Tom Skerrit, Sigourney Weaver and Ian Holm in *Alien*

the external world, and Klein's fundamental privileging of the mother-infant relationship.<sup>2</sup> Central to Klein's understanding of infant development is the way she reformulated Freud's theory of the death drive through her conception of infantile aggression, and how this aggression is projected by the infant, in phantasy, onto/into the mother's body. In Klein's scheme, phantasies of the mother, both gratifying and frightening, are employed by the infant to negotiate its burgeoning sense of self and other. This process is characterized in its earliest stages by the splitting of good attributes from bad and assigning these attributes, in phantasy, to separate objects in order that the good which is felt to reside in both self and other may be protected and preserved. A primary consequence of infantile aggression is the way it gives rise to the construction of the figure of the frightening maternal imago.<sup>3</sup> This projection is primarily a consequence of the infant's own aggression, giving rise to an archaic, unconscious structure which we will show to be present as phantasies of the mother's body appearing throughout the three *Alien* films.<sup>4</sup>

In light of our interest in demonstrating the usefulness of a Kleinian perspective we will concentrate on the representations of three archaic infantile phantasies of the mother's body. Briefly put, these phantasies are:

1) the infant's exploration of the insides of the mother's body and its contents in *Alien*; 2) the "phallic mother" and the figure of the "combined parents" in *Aliens*; and 3) maternal sacrifice and death in *Alien 3*. It is interesting to note that the progression of these three phantasy structures in the films neatly parallels the order of their development in the infant's construction of object relations.

## Part I EXPLORATIONS

*Oral envy is one of the motive forces which make children of both sexes want to push their way into mother's body and which arouse the desire for knowledge allied to it.*

Melanie Klein

*The Psychoanalysis of the Child*

WE BEGIN WITH THE FIRST FILM of the trilogy, *Alien*, shortly after the crew of the *Nostromo* have been awakened by Mother, the ship's computer, in order to investigate a mysterious beacon emanating from an as yet uncharted planet. After a faulty landing on the planet's surface, Dallas, Kane, and Lambert set out to find the source of the beacon, which they discover is coming from an apparently ancient space ship that appears to have crashed on the planet's surface. At this point the female navigator Lambert, sensing danger ahead, balks at going further; Kane, however, in boyish excitement insists that they carry on. Entering the ship through what can only be described as a vaginal opening, the three find themselves walking through a tubular orifice, eventually making their way up into the vast cavern of the flight deck. Within a huge circle, reclining in a ship at the ship's controls, sits a long-dead alien creature. Elongated and fossilized, the penis/alien is arrested in motion as the camera watches Dallas and Lambert climb upon its body. In the center of its chest a gaping hole appears, and Dallas remarks upon the fact that the chest bones have been pushed out as if something had exploded from within. Off-

screen Kane makes his own discovery and calls for his comrades to see what he has found. In a corner of the room there is another hole, this time on the floor, and we find Kane peering into its unknown depths. With the help of Dallas and Lambert, Kane is lowered by an umbilical-like cord into the darkness only to find another vast room, this time lit by an eerie incandescent blue light.<sup>5</sup> The room is divided by a narrow pathway and the air appears hot, thick and moist. Kane calls back that it feels like the tropics and one can only wonder with "memorial" horror what he will find in this new dark continent. Bending over the edge of the path, Kane remarks upon the strangeness of the light field beneath his feet which shimmers when touched. Losing his balance he falls into the light amongst rows of egg-like pods. As he examines one of them it slowly opens as a series of cuts transport us back and forth between Kane and the unknown pod. The tension, built up by our foreknowledge of impending catastrophe caused by the stream of cuts between Kane and the now open egg, crescendos as something bursts forward with dizzying but deliberate speed, in the direction of Kane's face.

The interior of the mother's body as a site of phantasy was not unknown to Freud. In "The Uncanny" he notes that the German *unheimlich* contains the sense of "home" which Freud denotes as not only one's domicile but also the womb.

It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning.<sup>6</sup>

But let us also recall that in the same work Freud remarks that "[w]here the uncanny comes from infantile complexes the question of material reality does not arise; its place is taken by psychical reality."<sup>7</sup> As with the concept of the imago, in our discussion of the above scenes we are not so much dealing with real figures in uncanny material stemming from infancy, but rather with pre-symbolic, pre-oedipal imaginary figures, that is to say phantasy figures of an unconscious infantile nature. Thus we can say that the figure of the "maternal imago" in general and as it is portrayed through the overdetermining displacements of *Alien* is, *par excellence*, the figure of the uncanny. Therefore, as a narrative device, the uncanny has the potential for calling up, in the form of "the return of the repressed," unconscious phantasies of the mother and in particular, as the *Alien* trilogy demonstrates, unconscious phantasies of the mother's insides.

We noted earlier that Kane's desire to investigate the ancient ship contains the affect of boyish adventure. This is evident both in his volunteering to go on the expedition and his willingness to descend into the dark cavern that contains the alien eggs. Though Lambert is the most reluctant of the three explorers, Dallas too seems less adventurous than Kane, for when Kane volunteers, Dallas says with moderated disdain, "That figures." Furthermore, when Dallas and

Lambert are examining the fossilized carcass of the alien space traveller, Kane's entreatments to come and see the hole he has found are delivered more as a plea than a request.

It is precisely in looking at the dangers implicit in the infant's desire to know the mother's insides that we can determine the nature of Dallas and Lambert's hesitation — and conversely Kane's exuberance. Being stuck at the site of the dead alien reminds us of Freud's statement in *Totem and Taboo* that it is necessarily the figure of the dead father, actualized through the guilt of a projected and ritualized slaying, that produces a taboo for us, as much as the primal sons, against the exclusive right to the ownership of women, a right which previously the primal father had had. As Freud notes, "[t]he dead father becomes stronger than the living one had been..."<sup>8</sup> However, it is not simply Kane's boyish enthusiasm that leads him to break the incest taboo and law against exclusivity for there is something more archaic, more unconscious at work here. As *Alien* shows us,

2. See Melanie Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms (1946)" in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946-1963* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), pp. 1-24; "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States (1935)" and "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States (1940)" *Love, Guilt, and Reparation and Other Works, 1921-1945* (New York: Delacourt, 1975), pp. 262-289 and 344-369 respectively. With regard to our use of the word "phantasy" we will follow the Kleinian distinction in spelling, in which "phantasy" indicates unconscious mental representations, and the more common spelling "fantasy" indicates conscious mental images or daydreams.

3. Laplanche and Pontalis, in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, write that the imago is an "unconscious prototypical figure which orients the subject's way of apprehending others; it is built up on the basis of the first real and phantased relationships within the family environment." The imago should be thought of, they tell us, as an "acquired imaginary set rather than as an image...Feelings and behavior...are just as likely to be the concrete expressions of the imago as are mental images." Lastly, Laplanche and Pontalis remind us that the imago should not be thought of as a reflection of the real world, "even in a more or less distorted form," for to do so neglects the crucial role of phantasy in the formation of the imago: the imago of a terrifying parent, for example, may be constructed by a subject whose real, living, breathing parents were never anything other than gentle and loving. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth, 1985), p. 211.

4. Certainly other writers have drawn attention to the figure of the mother in these films, though their emphasis has been different from ours. See for example, Rhona Berenstein, "Mommy Dearest: Aliens, Rosemary's Baby and Mothering," *Journal of Popular Culture*, pp. 55-73; Linda K. Bundtzen, "Monstrous Mothers: Medusa, Grendel, and Now Alien," *Film Quarterly* 40:3 (1986/87), pp. 11-17; and Harvey R. Greenberg, "The Fractures of Desire: Psychoanalytic Notes on Alien and the Contemporary 'Cruel' Horror Film" *Psychoanalytic Review* 70:2 (1983), pp. 241-267.

5. Ridley Scott is well known for his dramatic use of lighting with his penchant for shafts of dusty light and voluminous shadows in post-industrial technophilic settings. This dichotomous use of lighting not only heightens the element of mystery in his films but also functions in tandem with his other oppositional markers of inside/outside, past/future, new/old, alien/non-alien, human/non-human, real/synthetic, industrial/technological, that take central and often conflicting, ambivalent and purposively confusing positions in *Blade Runner* and *Black Rain* as well as in *Alien*.

6. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *The Pelican Freud Library*, Vol. 14, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 368.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 372.

8. Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo," *The Pelican Freud Library*, Vol. 13, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 202-208.

such law breaking has its effects upon the entire social network that constitutes the crew of the *Nostromo*. The signifier of the law, the dead father, having been displaced introduces a blank space in the social, a space which more and more comes to be occupied by the figure of the alien. Only Ripley, who had tried to bar the return of Dallas, Lambert and the infected Kane, keeps faith with the law and manages to survive. With each death the crew grows more unable to work as a coherent unit, the alien driving them progressively mad, culminating in the chilling scene of Lambert's paralysis in the face of the Alien Thing, until finally Ripley alone remains to banish it back into the space from whence it came.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly the moral of *Totem and Taboo* is located in the dead father's injunction or message that the sons not follow his path lest they repeat the murderous crime. For Lambert and Dallas some of that message is returned to them in the form of their hesitancy, fixing them within a fractured space of contact with the Third Party of Oedipalization, reminding them that they are transgressing the system of exclusivity over women. But we can reduce this plurality to one, that is to say the maternal object. In *Alien* only Kane seems willing to fully transgress this law by virtually denying the overpowering presence (both visually and unconsciously) of the dead father — alien — paternal penis that lives within the body of the ship whose female physicality demands that it be understood as the interior of the mother's body.

As we follow Kane's exploration further into the mother/ship we follow him along the path of regression, the psychotic underside of his boyish enthusiasm, to the paranoid-schizoid position. But if we follow him it is because we can unconsciously identify with Kane's quest, for each in our turn have born witness in our infancy to the phantasy of the mother's hidden contents. However, what Kane fails to realize is that he is caught in this regression, a regression which completely takes him over when the crab-like alien leaps out of its shell. His face, now covered by the fleshy crab, his body in a coma, renders him useless and outside of symbolic activity. He is autistic, catatonic, helpless as a baby who fantasizes its own smothering death from an uncontrollable bad breast. As Slavoj Žižek has noted, "...the 'alien'...is a pre-symbolic, maternal Thing *par excellence*."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, following Žižek, we might say that the alien is a symptom:

The Parasite adhering to Hurt's face is thus a kind of 'sprout of enjoyment', a leftover of the maternal Thing which then functions as a symptom — the Real of enjoyment — of the group marooned in the wandering space-ship: it threatens them and at the same time constitutes them as a closed group.<sup>11</sup>

The moment of Kane's infection by the parasite is one of the most horrifying scenes in *Alien*. But we must ask from where this horror comes. It is not simply a question of being startled by the swift movement of the crab-like thing, but more a horror coming from an act of retribution, one which we may all identify with and fear. In a sense, Kane gets what he deserves for disturbing the hidden contents that have lain so long in darkness. What we are dealing with here is a projection of an archaic nature. One of the key aspects of the infant's attempts

to investigate the inside of the mother's body is the phantasy of laying waste to what lies within. We cannot doubt that on an unconscious level the eggs in the alien ship are but a displacement of the eggs and unborn babies hidden within the mother's body. Kane's wish, like the infant's, to plunder the contents of the mother's body gives rise to the phantasy of a necessary maternal response: revenge for such an aggressive transgression of maternal bodily integrity. The infant's own aggression, which engenders the exploratory and pillaging phantasy, is projected onto/into the maternal object, and is thus revisited upon the infant in the form of the phantasy of maternal revenge, an eye for an eye, or what Klein calls "talion mortality." In this case, the wish to rob the mother of her eggs and babies causes the infant/Kane to be violently impregnated.

Violent though the scene of impregnation is, the mother's phantasied revenge has only just begun. After having given up on their efforts to dislodge the crab-like creature from Kane's face and throat, the crew is surprised to discover several hours later that the creature has fallen from its host of its own accord. At a celebratory dinner prior to returning to hyper-sleep for the journey home, the crew, along with the audience, are relaxed and relieved that the nightmare appears to be over. But this is quickly interrupted by the horrific scene of the caesarean birth of the alien infant as it gnaws its way out through Kane's chest.

Before discussing this scene let us link it to another moment of evisceration: the decapitation of the android science officer, Ash. Ash's decapitation occurs mid-way in the film, after the alien has devoured Brett the mechanic and Dallas. Ripley, who has been suspicious of Ash since he broke quarantine by letting Kane re-enter the ship, has discovered from Mother that it was the Company who had sent them on this mission and that the crew is expendable. Ash attacks Ripley because she now becomes a threat to the Company's plan, but she is saved by Parker who, in swinging a fire extinguisher at Ash's head, dislodges it. In the spraying of milky-white effluvia and the sighting of intestine-like tubes we discover Ash's android status. What is at stake here is the visibility of insides, their abject presence and primitive/primordial maternal nature rather than the sex of either Kane or Ash. Here we have a chain of signifiers which link a number of internal bodily elements together: the parasite's tail, the spaghetti that Kane ingests prior to his convulsion, and Ash's arterial tubes produce the over-determined sign of entrails. The parasite's molecular acid, Kane's splattering blood and Ash's effluvia denote the abject liquidity of the body's insides.<sup>12</sup>

In these two scenes with their powerful representations of blood and milk, the mother's insides are turned against the crew of the *Nostromo*. The mother's abilities to give and sustain life are reversed, becoming terrifying phantasies of disembowelment, destruction and death. What began as a phantasy of exploration and expropriation is transformed during the course of the film via the mechanisms of projective identification<sup>13</sup> into a phantasy of maternal revenge which progressively takes over more and more of the space previously safely occupied by the crew, culminating in the *Nostromo* itself becoming host to the alien at the expense of its human crew.

## Part II PROSTHETICS

Two basic types of bodies exemplify the corporal metaphysics at the heart of fascist perception. On the one side there is the soft, fluid, and ultimately liquid female body which is a quintessentially negative "Other" lurking inside the male body. It is the subversive source of pleasure or pain which must be expurgated or sealed off. On the other hand there is the hard, organized, phallic body devoid of all internal viscera which finds its apotheosis in the machine.<sup>14</sup>

Benjamin and Rabinach

"Forward" to Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, vol. II.

IN CHOOSING TO DISCUSS THE ALIEN TRILOGY from the point of view of infantile phantasies, we have been struck by the way in which the development of these phantasies as they occur in the films parallels their development in the psychological life of the infant. We would expect, then, that once a phantasy has been established, it would continue to operate not only in subsequent scenes within the same film, but in the sequels to the original *Alien* as well. In addition, we would also expect to discover the development of subsequent phantasies which function as defenses against earlier phantasies.

*Aliens*, the second film of the Alien trilogy, opens with a sleeping Ripley, the only surviving member of the Nostromo crew, being rescued by a salvage team that has discovered her escape shuttle drifting in space. We then cut to Ripley in a hospital bed, being told by a Company executive that she has been in hyper-sleep for over fifty years. As her shock begins to register, we are treated to another, more horrifying shock as Ripley arches back on the bed, alternately flailing her arms and clutching her stomach which begins to distend menacingly. As I.V. bottles and trays go flying,

9. Perhaps the earliest example of the use of the horrifying maternal Thing in a sci-fi film is that within *Forbidden Planet* (1956). Here the "creature from the Id" is a veritable projection of the scientist/father's unconscious maternal Thing which unknown to him he conjures up in an attempt to stop the romance and subsequent loss of his daughter to an explorer from Earth. Given that he and his daughter have lived alone for many years without her mother the daughter becomes the embodiment of the mother.

10. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (London: Verso, 1989), p. 132.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

12. In point of fact the importance of liquid becomes progressively more central throughout the trilogy. When we first see the alien's double jawed mouth it produces its teeth caked in a slimy ooze. In *Aliens* the destruction of an alien is generally accompanied by an explosion of liquid acid as is the mother alien's detachment from her long external fallopian tube. In *Alien 3* Ripley's death occurs when she lets herself fall into the huge vat of molten metal.

13. The psychological mechanism by which parts of the self — in this case a phantasy — are attributed to others.

14. An interesting reading of the *Aliens* trilogy that would parallel other articles which raise the question "are the *Aliens* films feminist or not?" would be to examine to what extent could these films be understood to hold an ambivalent tension between proto-fascism on the one hand and anti-fascism on the other.



The crew tries to coax out a survivor of the alien attack of the Earth colony in *Aliens*



*Aliens*

Ripley pleads with the nurse and Company executive who are struggling to restrain her, "Kill me, please!" Just at the moment we expect an alien infant to burst forth from Ripley's body, she awakens in a sweat from what we instantly recognize as a nightmare that recapitulates the impregnation fear/phantasy of the original film. This phantasy continues to operate throughout *Aliens* as different characters are captured and cocooned by the aliens, preserved until they are needed to function as surrogate wombs.

Further evidence that the phantasies of the mother's body that are set to work in the original film continue to operate in the second can be found in the terraformer station which has been set up by the Company on LV-426, the planet on which the crew of the *Nostromo* encountered the derelict alien spacecraft with its cargo of eggs. When contact is lost with the terraformer colony, Ripley is persuaded to act as a consultant to a platoon of Marines sent in to investigate the cause of the break in communications. Having seen the first film, we are immediately aware of how the corridors of the terraformer station replicate the interior of the alien spacecraft, having being transformed by the alien colony into a gigantic bodily interior complete with rib-like walls, glistening cavities, and intestine-like tubes and ducts, all shrouded in darkness. As the Marines penetrate the interior of the station in search of the aliens, their trackers lead them closer and closer to the very life-giving, death-dealing core of the station, its nuclear reactor. Drawing near to the alien nest, they are ordered to disarm their guns and put away their grenades, becoming trapped in a deathly paradox as the traditional means of defense become the potential catalysts of nuclear annihilation.

Thus the phantasies of horrific impregnation, oral-sadistic greed and devouring, and engulfing internal bodily cavities continue to set the tone in *Aliens* just as they did in the earlier film, this time on an even grander scale. By the final, climactic sequence of scenes, only Ripley, Newt (the little girl who is the only survivor of the terraformer colony), Hicks (an injured Marine corporal), and the android Bishop remain, as Ripley prepares for the showdown with the mother alien. She is sustained in this final battle not so much by her own desire to survive, but, importantly, by her drive to save Newt, who has clearly become the replacement, for Ripley, of the daughter who she left behind on earth during her mission on the *Nostromo*, and who grew to adulthood and died of old age while Ripley slept adrift in space.<sup>15</sup>

Having rescued Newt from the alien nest, Ripley stumbles upon the gargantuan mother alien and her freshly laid crop of eggs, which in a moment of calculated fury, Ripley torches with her flame thrower, enraging the mother alien. A series of scenes follow in which Ripley and Newt attempt to escape the rampaging mother alien, culminating in their being rescued by Bishop, who flies them safely back to the Marine spacecraft as the terraformer station is destroyed in a nuclear explosion. However, this is not the *dénouement* of the film, for the mother alien has managed to cling to the fleeing shuttle. She makes her presence known when her spear-like tail pierces Bishop through the chest, and in flinging him in the air rents him in two. As in the first film, only

Ripley remains to fight off the alien, for both the injured Hicks who remains aboard the shuttle, and the emasculated Bishop can be of no help to her now.

As the mother alien turns her fury towards Newt, Ripley draws the attention of the alien to herself, in a rush of maternal feeling. Newt dives under the floor grating and dodges the grasp of the mother alien, while Ripley ducks into a storage compartment, reappearing moments later having strapped herself into a robotic cargo loader. In doing so, she has transformed herself into a colossal combination of mother and machine. It is the prosthetic nature of the machine, with its massive weight, hydraulic potency, and pincer-like grip that enables Ripley to engage the alien in the mother of all battles. But, is it really as mothers that they fight now?

First, let us briefly consider how Ripley's employment of the robotic cargo loader transforms her into the phantasy figure of the phallic mother, in this case, a techno-phallic mother. What we are interested in here is how the phantasy of the phallic mother operates as a defense against the earlier phantasies of the frightening, devouring mother which we have examined above. We are familiar with the notion of the phallic mother as a phantasy which enables the child to deny sexual difference and the knowledge of mother's lack of a penis. The phantasy functions to cover over the absence of the penis, but it also covers over something else, something we are less familiar with: it enables the child, in attributing a *phallus* to mother, to deny the presence of some other, more frightening *maternal* — not phallic — power. In providing the mother with a phallus, the child creates a phantasy figure which both covers over, and is hopefully powerful enough, to defend against the more archaic image of the mother as devouring and revenge-seeking. In donning the prosthetic armor, Ripley becomes the representation of just such a defensive phantasy figure.

If Ripley is now the techno-phallic mother, in what phantasy might we find the horrifying image of the alien mother? We are already acquainted with the alien mother as devouring and revengeful, but in the final battle scene we sense that there is something more to her power. We find an answer in Klein's description of the phantasy of the combined parents. If we think back to *Alien*, we will recall that when Lambert, Dallas and Kane enter the derelict alien ship they discover not only eggs, but as we noted, the paternal penis in the form of the ship's fossilized crew member. The phantasy of the mother's body containing within it the paternal penis, gives rise to the phantasy of the combined parents, which in Klein's view becomes one of the most terrifying phantasies of infancy. In projecting its own sadistic omnipotence into the figure of the combined parents, the infant "endows them with instruments of mutual destruction, transforming their teeth, nails, genitals, excrements and so on, into dangerous weapons and animals, etc."<sup>16</sup> This description calls to mind the image of the mother alien

15. Interestingly, this background information concerning Ripley's daughter was cut from the version of *Aliens* which was released in the cinemas, but remains in the "director's cut" version that has been released on video.

16. Klein, *The Psychoanalysis of Children* (London: Hogarth, 1932), p. 200.

locked in final battle with Ripley: caught in the grip of the loader's pincers the alien attempts to get at Ripley by bringing its glistening elongated head forward, but she is impeded by the metal structure of the loader which protects Ripley as if she were enclosed in a shark-cage. Seeking to penetrate the bars of this enclosure, the mother alien's mouth opens to reveal two rows of teeth, one of which extends out of the mouth and snaps at Ripley's face. At one point Ripley manages to grasp the mother alien and lift her off the ground. At this moment we see the full extent of the mother alien's body, her tail and many arms frantically circling the air in a Medusa-like fashion. What we have here is an externalized representation of the combined parents, with the alien mother's head and tail as the paternal phallus, and teeth as vagina dentata, the combined attributes of this phantasy figure making it all the more menacing, horrific and powerful. Thus, the final battle sequence is not merely combat between two mothers, but two phantasi:ed maternal representations: it is a battle of the phallic mother brought forth as a defense against the more archaic and more terrifying figure of the combined parents.

### Part III

#### MATERNAL SACRIFICE AND DEATH

*The profound and escalating terror is that mother and the objects inside her will retaliate against the infant. It arises from the oral wishes which led to wanting to incorporate all these things for [itself] and the infant ends up in the midst of a phantasy that all these retaliatory wounded objects are now marauding as internal persecutors in [its] own insides after being introjected there, and as the persecuting external figure.*

R.D. Hinshelwood

*A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*

TURNING NOW TO THE THIRD AND FINAL FILM of the Alien trilogy, *Alien 3*, we are particularly interested in the way in which the final scene reconstitutes an archaic, infantile phantasy of maternal sacrifice and death. In the course of doing so the film also provides an occasion to interrogate psychical and social structures pertaining to pregnancy and childbirth, for the focus of *Alien 3* centres on Ripley's discovery of her alien impregnation and the means of its termination.

After having crash-landed on a barren planet that acts as a penal colony, Ripley finds herself among its all male inmates who have formed a religious fundamentalist celibate brotherhood. Unknown to Ripley the mother alien had managed to lay a few eggs on the Marine spacecraft, one of which takes the colony's dog as host, and upon the alien's birth it begins to attack the inmates. We learn of Ripley's alien pregnancy when she is cornered by the alien who in the midst of his attack stops, hisses at her and then retreats. Returning to the destroyed ship, Ripley retrieves an ultrasound monitor and discovers that she has a mother alien

Sigourney Weaver and Charles Dutton in *Alien 3*



growing inside her. Resolving to end her life she is persuaded to forestall this action but only until the other alien has been killed. This is finally accomplished when, having escaped a medieval death by boiling metal, the alien's superheated body is exploded by being sprayed with ice cold water. At this point a troop of Suits arrives at the colony and attempts to stop Ripley's suicide. The leader tells her that he can remove the alien foetus without killing her but she does not believe him. Her only escape from the Company and from giving birth to a new mother-alien is suicide. We watch the final scene unfold in slow motion as Ripley allows herself to fall backwards into the vat of molten metal that now serves as a backdrop to Ripley's falling body. During Ripley's descent the alien baby breaks through her chest but Ripley, in a final act of heroism, manages to grasp hold of it, thereby taking it with her to her death.

It is entirely within the logic of the maternal that the two previous films have set to work that Ripley would become the space, that uncanny home, for the new "mother alien" which she bears. With Ripley's discovery of her alien pregnancy her worst fears are realized, but in a sense our own unconscious fears, particularly of loss of mother are also recalled. What is it that Ripley carries inside her if not a Thing which once it comes, can replace (or destroy) us all? Have not all the infantile investigations that precede *Alien 3* been undertaken for the sole purpose of rendering impossible all connection of the mother's insides with others? Are not Kane's denial of the paternal penis and attempted robbery of the eggs/babies the setting up of the phallic mother as that which will defend and defeat the coagulated representation of the combined parents in the form of the mother alien, sanguinary signs of an attack against bad internal objects projected into the mother and returned now in the form of messages of maternal sacrifice? And yet if we follow the unconscious/filmic logic of the *Alien* trilogy we find that failure (the failure to eradicate all connection with marauding internal and external others) is the major constant that allows for the dreaded repressed Thing to return. But through the phantasy of omnipotence it is not we who have floundered; nor is it mother who has failed. Mother stands for comfort and in our infantile narcissism we demand that she make the greatest pledge of allegiance, the greatest tribute to her love for us: we demand a recall of the infantile phantasy of maternal sacrifice. If the most terrifying place for us is located within mother as the un-nameable nameless Thing, what better way to rid ourselves of this horror, in phantasy at least, than through mother's selfless sacrifice. If mother disappears (or Ripley for that matter) we gain much more, at least in terms of object representations, for she too becomes more powerful, more protective dead than living. She dies in order that we might live, or at least leave the cinema.

As noted above, the phantasy of maternal sacrifice called forth by Ripley's suicide offers us an opportunity to consider the relationship between infantile psychical formations and their projections onto and into the social. Let us note that in Ripley's death we have the symbolics of not only maternal sacrifice but also in symbolic form a decision about the termination of an unwanted pregnancy. It is

not surprising that such an issue would arise at this moment given the rise of right-wing religious fundamentalism, the bombing of abortion clinics and the attempt to turn back the clock on abortion legislation. But it would be simplistic to argue that *Alien 3* takes either a symbolic pro or contra stance. Indeed what seems to be taking place is precisely the kind of tension, division, and even ambivalence that currently characterizes the abortion debate. Consider, for example, how one might define the nature of Ripley's suicide.

We have noted the psychical determinants as they are registered within the phantasy of maternal sacrifice: Ripley kills herself in order that others might live. But does this not follow the scary logic of the anti-choice campaign that seeks to entrench the idea (the phantasy) that a mother's life must be subsumed, even sacrificed for the sake of the unborn. Is this not given to us in the request of the Company man who says that he can save Ripley along with the alien foetus; hence two souls would be saved? Not only this, but if we also recall the phantasy of robbing the mother's body of its eggs and babies, we can read the religious right's hysteria as the projection of guilt arising from this infantile crime.<sup>17</sup>

However, Ripley's refusal and decision to terminate the alien pregnancy presents us with a dilemma, for just at the moment when she appears to exercise freedom of choice she is forced to end her life. At one level of reading we can certainly see the sign which states, "The only good abortive mother is a dead mother." But if we see this as the only possible reading of Ripley's decision, do we not excuse ourselves from any and all responsibility for the many women who in seeking an abortion where abortion is criminalized have also lost their lives? Ripley's decision can thus be read as a "tragic refusal" to give her body up to the social and by facing externality and marginalization she faces death. These are the limits of a society whose phantasy projections are truly infantile, where narcissistic investment gets redeployed as Law.

Our cultural productions, then, can serve as rich opportunities to uncover and interrogate the workings of unconscious infantile phantasies, serving as they do as containers into which we project those phantasies, and by doing so, seek and gain a form of mastery over them. We have found that using Kleinian theory in this way to look at the films of the *Alien* trilogy broadens and deepens our understanding of the power of horror. But that power is not simply situated within the filmic scene, for as we have attempted to demonstrate, it always threatens to — and indeed often does — break out into the scene of the social. If Benjamin and Rabinbach, as quoted above, can write about the denigration of the maternal body as part of the *fascist* mentality, can we not also consider frighteningly powerful representations of the maternal body as part of the *infantile* mentality? Indeed, might it not be the case that these two mentalities, fascist and infantile, are related?

17. We might also speculate about the presence of guilt as a product of fratricidal wishes (the wish to rid mother's body of rival babies) and/or the infantile fear of infanticide (talion mortality).

Raising Cain



# MIRROR, MIRROR on the WALL

PARENT  
AND  
PSYCHO  
AS ONE  
IN THE 90'S

In the American horror films of the post-war era, the enemy always comes from outside the national-communal-family circle. However, within that circle, at its

very hub, stand the protective parents, identifiable as the "good guys" because they belong, but equally important, because they look like they belong.

authority may also have a great deal to do with the fact that he is played by Nick Nolte, an actor often cast as dissolute, hard-living loners, (*Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, 1985, *Weeds*, 1987, *48-Hours*, 1982). It makes it difficult to recognize and accept him as *one of us*, part of the family circle.

The power of film parents is most seriously undermined by the child's inability to recognize them as such. Their protective role has been usurped by those who pose the greatest threat. Peyton, the nanny in Curtis Hanson's *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), effortlessly outshines her traditional employer, Claire. Following her husband's

In the original *Cape Fear* (1962), morality is clearly on the side of Sam Bowden, an upstanding successful lawyer and family man, and against Cady, a brutal thug. But the audience's judgement of the two characters is equally based on our recognition of type. Robert Mitchum, typically played the dangerous tough-guy with a shady past, (*Out of the Past*, 1946, *Night of the Hunter*, 1955) while Gregory Peck continually played the reliable, strong, father figure (*Gentleman's Agreement*, 1947, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1962, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, 1956).

More recently, we seem to have dispensed with the traditional distinctions between "us" and them". In the remake of *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1991) Bowden does not invite the same trust and approval. His success and influence as a lawyer, is not a factor, and in the post-yuppie '90's, may be a black mark against him. His lack of paternal

The Hand That Rocks the Cradle



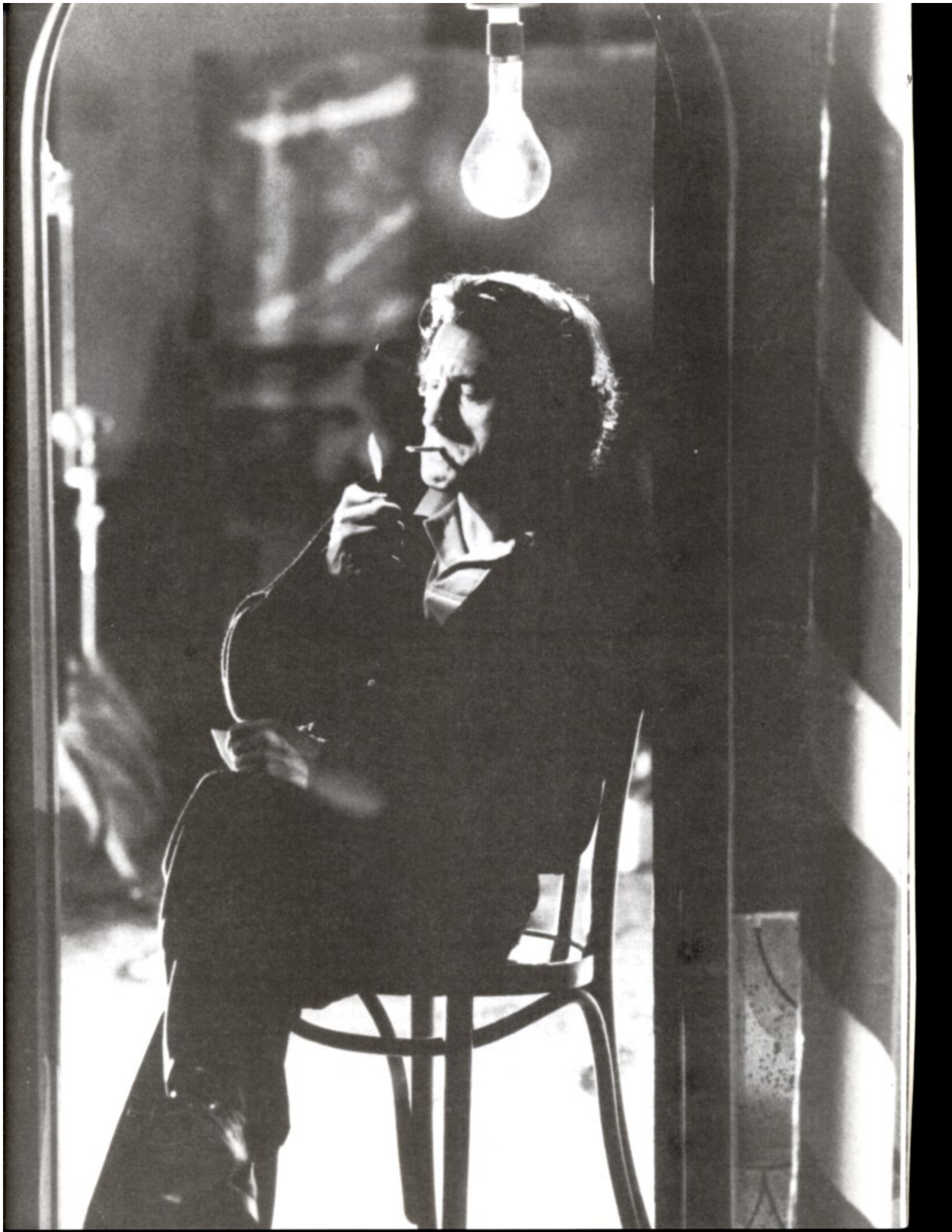
The Hand That Rocks the Cradle



suicide and her miscarriage, Peyton sets out to avenge herself on Claire, whom she believes is responsible for her misfortunes. By making sexual advances to Claire's husband, breast-feeding her baby, and winning the loyalty of her small daughter, she effectively replaces Claire as a figure of trust and authority within her own family. In the remake of *Cape Fear*, DeNiro's Cady employs a similar strategy. One of the film's most disturbing sequences takes place in a deserted high school auditorium, where Cady has lured Danielle. He wins her trust by offering her the attention and understanding she cannot get from her neurotic and selfish parents. In a gesture as maternal as it is sexual, he puts his thumb into her mouth, encouraging her to suckle.

In the original *Cape Fear*, Cady deliberately terrorizes the Bowdens' daughter: when he finally corners her in the basement of an empty school, the camera closes on her, crouched behind the boiler, trembling violently as she listens to the sound of his approaching footsteps. In the remake, Danielle is willingly drawn into Cady's web, even when she is warned by her father what kind of monster he is, even when Cady poisons the family dog. Her desperate need for Cady's attention overrides her natural caution.

However — as cunning as DeNiro's Cady may be, he would not be as successful if Danielle's parents hadn't failed to fulfil their protective role. In the original *Cape Fear*, Bowden's wife, played by wholesome Polly Bergen, threatens to call the police rather than allow him to ruin his life by killing Cady, and in the climactic scene, sacrifices herself to Cady to distract him from her teenage daughter. But in the remake, Leigh Bowden — significantly played by Jessica Lange who is often cast as women on the edge — is too self-involved to even notice that her daughter is in danger. In several of these films the mother/wife is somehow debilitated. Leigh Bowden seems to be on the verge of a nervous break-down long before Cady enters her life. Claire Bartel in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* suffers from incapacitating asthma attacks at crucial moments. This phenomenon even extends beyond horror films. In *The Doctor* (1991), Christine Lahti plays a lawyer oddly incapable of communication with her own husband at a time when it is most needed, and in *Patriot Games* (1992), Jack Ryan tends to his critically injured young daughter while





Parents

his wife, a surgeon who routinely performs life-enhancing operations on children, lies helpless in her hospital bed. Not since Ripley in *Aliens*, back in 1986, have we seen a film mother ready, willing and able to fight to the death for her child.

Our inability to place our trust appropriately is due to the fact that neither the psycho nor the parent look or act any longer according to their traditional roles. In some cases, there is no distinction between them at all: they are already fused into one being. In *Raising Cain* (1992), Carter is both the father defending his family and the psycho destroying it. He is part of a continuous chain of cruelty, going back at least as far as his father who deliberately victimized his own children. In *Parents* (1987), a small boy discovers that his Ozzie-and-Harriet-look-a-like parents are cannibals. The child's fear of being hunted or devoured by the paternal/maternal figure is by no means a new phenomenon. It can be traced as far back as the Greek myth of Cronus and Zeus, or to fairy tales like "Snow White" and "Hansel and Gretel." It is appropriate that Scorsese's Cady chooses to seduce Danielle in front of a gingerbread house: like the witch in the story, he preys upon abandoned children.

The phenomenon of the weak or untrustworthy parent in recent horror films also seems to extend outward to other traditional figures of authority. In *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Dr. Hannibal Lecter, a well-established psychiatrist is consulted by the F.B.I. for his expert opinions on psychopathology even though he himself is criminally insane. In *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* Peyton's husband is an obstetrician who molests his pregnant patients. In *Basic Instinct* (1992), detective Nick's past lover and current therapist is a murder suspect. In *Dr. Giggles* (1992), a surgeon laughs as he performs open-heart surgery without anaesthetic. In the second *Cape Fear*, Cady poses as a teacher. In *Raising Cain* Carter's father is a famous child psychologist.

It is interesting that one of Carter's multiple personalities is a female, whose function is to "protect the children" who are other multiple personalities. In the past, Carter never really had a father in the traditional, paternal sense of the role, nor does he have one in the present. The father we see is really another one of his "multiples". Nor do we ever see or hear any mention of his mother. Here, in a bizarre reversal of the natural order, the child creates the family. Carter gives birth to the father who clinically masterminds the

crimes of which Carter's gentle dominant personality is incapable. Carter also gives birth to an evil identical twin brother, who actually commits the crimes. And he gives birth to Margo, who provides the mothering he lacks.<sup>1</sup>

Split personalities and metamorphoses have long been favourite topics of horror. Many of the first horror novels (*Frankenstein*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Dracula*, to name but a few) are cautionary tales which explore the consequences of removing the barriers between life and death, good and evil, "us" and "them". It is important to note that these stories were written during periods of enormous change. *Frankenstein* was written during the height of the Industrial Revolution and the political reconstruction of Western Europe. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Dracula* were written during the Victorian era, which saw the advent of the electric light bulb, the telephone, the automobile, and Darwin's "The Origin of Species". It makes sense that the horror film's two most prolific periods also witnessed radical and terrifying changes. While the monster movies of the late '20's and early '30's followed on the heels of World War I and the stock market crash, the horror/sci-fi films of the '50's and '60's expressed many social anxieties that came out of World War II, including the Bomb, Communism and space exploration.

All of these dark celluloid manifestations express our conflicting attitude toward change: we both welcome and resist it. Classical psychoanalytic theory describes human development as a series of traumatic separations, beginning with our emergence from the womb. While the cultural rite of passage can be seen as a mass social weaning, a rejection of the old in favour of the new<sup>2</sup>, the fact that we continue to pass on the old myths and traditions demonstrates our inability to completely let go.

The drastic changes and general mood of paranoia following the second world war necessitated the formation of a strong united front. The choice of parent figure as hero in the horror films of the '50's and '60's was as natural as it was traditional. The father and mother did not have to be "sold" to the audience as trustworthy, dependable leaders. As well, the largest portion of that audience were teenagers, who, in the midst of their own unsettling metamorphoses from childhood to adulthood, might have unconsciously needed additional reassurances. The parent figures' effectiveness in combatting The Enemy may have provided all the "children" in the audience with an unimpeachable argument against separation from them, and on a larger scale, additional justification for their instinctive fear of change.

But the old threats of the '50's and '60's have lost their power. We have witnessed the call for nuclear disarmament, the fall of Communism in Europe, and the fear of communication with other planets replaced with anticipation. The traditional distinctions between "us" and "them" which have always formed the crux of the horror genre are in danger of disappearing. In order to identify "good," we must be able to identify "evil," and in order to remain children, we still require the presence of our parents. Thus we have combined the protective parent and destructive psycho into one.

When the magic mirror declares that Snow White is the "fairest of them all," it marks her impending transition from child to adult. This is what really triggers the Queen's fury: the plot to kill her stepdaughter is not only a deliberate abdication of the protective parental role, but also shows her desperation to maintain the status quo, to forestall, rather than accept the inevitability of change.<sup>3</sup> By simply growing up Snow, White becomes the author of her own destruction.

Our fear of change is reinforced by the gruesome depiction of the metamorphosis. The transformations of the Queen into the witch, Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde, and Michael Landon into a Teenage Werewolf, all appear to be extremely agonizing. Our natural aversion to pain, combined with the ghastly change in their appearance, help us achieve the emotional distance necessary to self-defense. How else could Jonathan Harker bring himself to plunge a stake through his fiancée's vampire heart? In recent horror films however, the cushion of distance is no longer there to break the fall. It often has been suggested that this disturbing new phenomenon may be a reflection of the broken homes, sexual abuse, drug addiction and gang warfare that in the big American cities are becoming increasingly a part of "normal" childhood existence.

Nonetheless, interesting to note, and perhaps also a significant factor, is that the children of the '50's are now the parents, and the audience are now the filmmakers. The adolescent conflict regarding change is still present, as is the desperation to fill the void with new distinctions. Like a starving creature, the child of the '50's, grown into the parent of the '90's, has begun to feed upon him/herself.

The original principle and purpose of the parent-child relationship — survival of the species — has become terribly twisted. The children of recent horror films have come to see their parents as a destructive rather than protective force, while the parents have come to see their children as the final push toward adulthood and death. Like the Queen and Snow White, they each perceive the other as the greatest threat to their survival.

Small wonder that since ancient times we have held tightly to the boundaries and fought so hard to maintain the status quo. In these recent horror films we have realized our worst nightmares. We have been dragged kicking and screaming through the dreaded metamorphosis and have emerged on the other side as monsters.

1. DePalma's tributary and imitative approach toward Hitchcock's Freudian style is implicit in Carter's relationship to his "father" and "mother". Carter's development of an imaginary protective mother figure to defend himself against the imaginary tyrannical father figure could be interpreted as a twisted Oedipal triangle, with himself in the middle as the perpetually destructive child.

2. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1968, pg. 52

3. Significantly, Snow White finds security with the Seven Dwarves, who perceive her as an innocent child requiring their constant protection. In the animated Disney film, they are depicted as kindly, white-haired, and old. Even the prince, whose life-saving kiss launches Snow White into womanhood, displays a paternal protective attitude toward her.

# Keeping the BlackPl

## GENDER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK MASCULINITY IN *BOYZ 'N' THE HOOD*

by *Rinaldo Walcott*

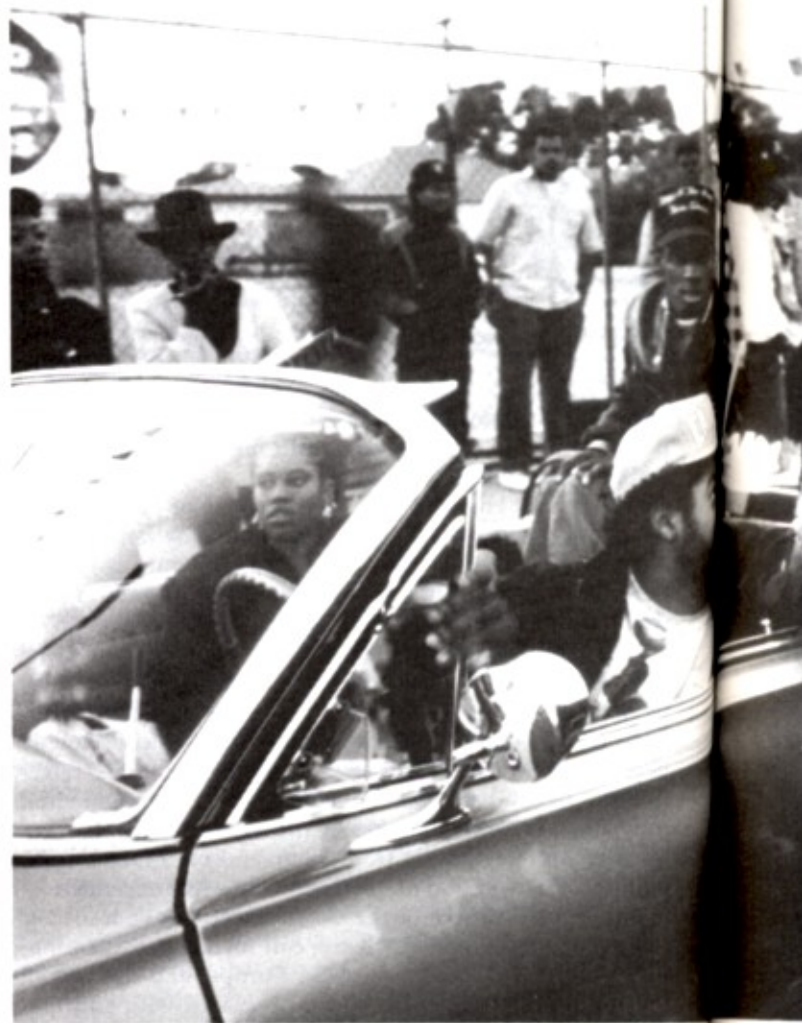
Black male students came to talk with me, bringing their buddies, because they were in conflict over their different interpretations of the film. They were deeply concerned with the issue of whether negative critique meant they were not supportive of a brother (i.e., Spike Lee) who is trying to make it and be in solidarity with blackness. Also they feared that disagreement among themselves might disrupt feelings of racial bonding and solidarity. Again, as we educate one another to acquire critical consciousness, we have the chance to see how important airing diverse perspectives can be for any progressive political struggle that is serious about transformation.

(bell hooks, p. 7, 1990)

By the tenets of black macho, true masculinity admits little or no space for self-interrogation or multiple subjectivities around race. Black macho prescribes an inflexible ideal: Strong black men — "Afrocentric" black men — don't flinch, don't weaken, don't take blame or shit, take charge, step-to when challenged, and defend themselves without pause for self doubt.

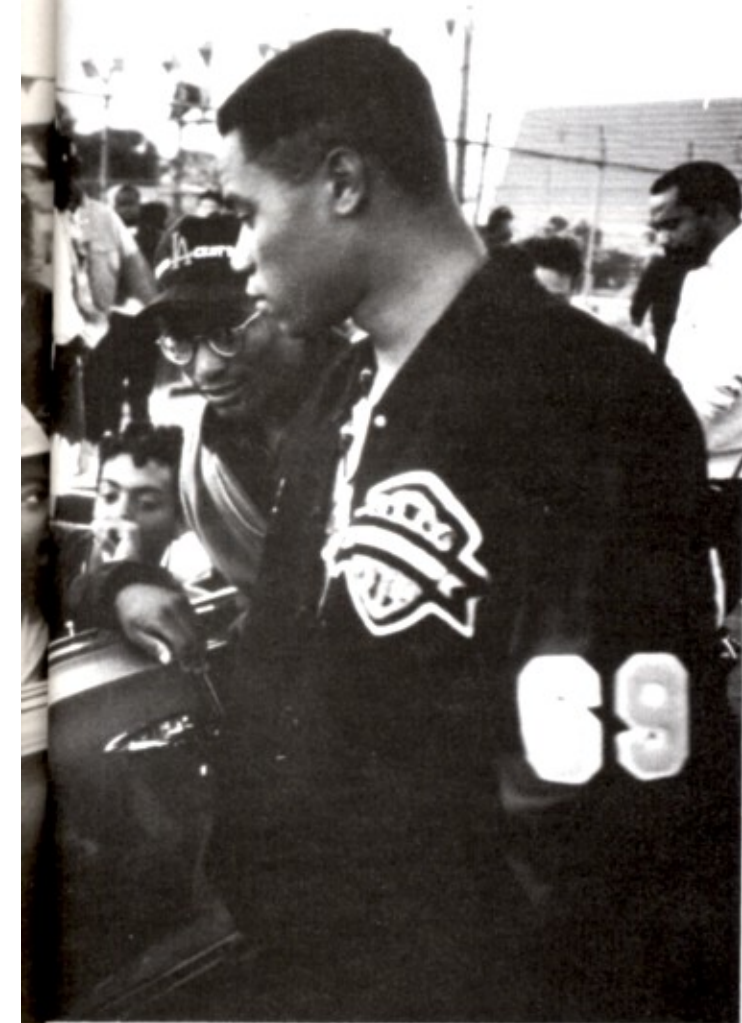
Black macho counterpoises this warrior model of masculinity with the emasculated Other: the Other as punk, sissy, Negro faggot, a status with which any man, not just those who in fact are gay, can be, and are, branded should one deviate from rigidly prescribed codes of hyper-masculine conduct.

(Marlon Riggs, p. 257, 1991)



Writer/director John Singleton (2nd from r.) discusses a scene with Ice Cube (in the driver's seat) and Cuba Gooding Jr. (r.) in *Boyz 'N' the Hood*.

# Khallus Erect



John Singleton's movie, *Boyz 'N' the Hood*, is one of the films that supposedly represents a "new" era in Black [male] filmmaking. Along with Spike Lee, Robert Townsend, Mario Van Peebles and others, Singleton is among a group of young Black male filmmakers that is currently being promoted as the new heirs of Black filmmaking.<sup>1</sup> These male directors of the "hottest" Black films to reach large mainstream audiences have garnered much attention and recognition for their counterhegemonic art. As a consumer of popular culture, I look forward to seeing the films of these directors and to engage their insights on issues of diaspora African culture, identity and representation. The release of *Boyz 'N' the Hood*, with its focus on Black on Black violence and the Black family was and remains an important addition to this new crop of films.

Critiquing the cultural production of those who are forging a counterhegemonic artistic episteme that seeks to place in the public sphere and market place a multi-dimensional portrayal of African-American family life is always a difficult thing to do.<sup>2</sup> As a Black male I engage Black films from more than a standpoint of "neutral" viewer. I become emotionally caught up in the numerous aspects of the film, ranging from television advertisements of it, to news reports and mainstream critics' receptions/perceptions of the films. *Boyz 'N' the Hood* received much attention and this made viewing the film that much more exciting for me. My reactions to watching the film ranged from laughter and joy to sadness and outrage and were fraught with contradictory feelings about the movie's message. What follows in this essay then are my reactions to Singleton's constructions of Black masculinity in the film as well as a short discussion of the portrayal of Black women in the film. Singleton's focus on the Black male as the site of contestation wherein the battle for the survival of the Black family rests is located within a narrow politics that reproduces patriarchal and heterosexist notions of Black family life. It is those categories that I want to focus on as a way of building a discussion around notions of Black masculinity in the movie, *Boyz 'N' the Hood*.

Singleton sets out to demonstrate that Black males need to be responsible for their children as a means to ending excessive Black on Black violence. The movie highlights this point from the very beginning by opening with the following statistics: one out of twenty-one Black males will be murdered and the majority of that violence is Black on Black violence. While these statistics are meant to shock one into the gravity of the situation facing Black males (and they do), it is Doughboy's (Ice Cube) comments that the rival gang

1. Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). In the essay "Cinematic Sisterhood," Tate along with the interviewees "expose" the myth of new black filmmakers as meaning only male black filmmakers. Tate interviews seven black women filmmakers (Michelle Parkerson, Jackie Shearer, Ayoka Chenzira, Daresha Kyi, Ellen Sumter, Dawn Suggs and Zeinabu Irene Davis) who have either made feature length films or were fund raising or making films at the time of his interviews.

3. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990). In the essay "Liberation scenes: Speak this Yearning," the idea and anxiety of critiquing black cultural production is explored and the opening quotation of this essay is taken from that essay.



Cuba Gooding Jr., Larry Fishburne, and Ice Cube in *Boyz 'N' the Hood*

member is old at twenty-seven that places the statistics at the beginning of the movie in perspective. Singleton proceeds to create a piece of art that demonstrates limited patriarchal and heterosexist roles for Black men in order for the Black family to be "saved."

If "saving" the Black family means that Black men must take on more patriarchal roles in their communities, then the Black family is definitely headed for total destruction. The mainstream Hollywood film industry has not yet arrived at a political and ideological position from which the production of movies that show alternate family organisations would be possible. However, those family organisations do exist and always have. Singleton models his portrayal on the dominant stereotype of the white, nuclear family model and even includes divorce and its negative effects on family members to make his point much more salient. I am not suggesting that those forms of family do not exist in Black communities. While it is true that it is not often in mainstream filmmaking that the Black male is accorded the opportunity of being responsible for his children, fatherhood is nonetheless a problematic portrayal in Singleton's movie. Furious Styles (Larry Fishburne), the father of Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding Jr.), is portrayed as the saving grace for his son. The individualistic approach that is put forward in the film as the means to dealing with the issues of family breakdown and violence in the Black community of South Central L.A. is a limited one. Joblessness, poverty and neo-conservative policies and politics are never addressed in the film as serious and important contributors to the breakdown of the Black family in the hood.<sup>3</sup>

There are two issues that must be addressed before I can

continue to discuss the construction of Black masculinity in the movie. The issues are the absence of an extended family and the construction of Black women in the film. In Singleton's movie the extended family plays little or no part in the solution to the problem he addresses. As I watch the film, I am struck throughout by the glaring absence of grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles and cousins. The extended family has been and continues to be an important part of Black family life in the diaspora. While it is true that the conditions that produce neighbourhoods like the one in the film make it difficult for the extended family to stay together, the extended family is nonetheless an aspect of Black family life that can not be easily dismissed or made non-existent. The lack of attention to this as an issue in the movie makes the film that much weaker. Extended families have always played important roles in Black families. Singleton only hints at this as is evident in the fact that Ricky's (played by Morris Chestnut) partner and child lived in his mother's house and his mother was the sole supporter of the family. However, Julie Dash's film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), demonstrates the importance of the extended family well. The attention that is paid to the grandmother's wishes to keep the family together and intact when some family members decide to move from the Gullah islands to the mainland shows the extended family at play. Those who stay behind on the Gullah islands know that support lies within an extended family. Singleton's neglect and lack of attention to the extended family shows a slip in adequately attempting to interrogate Black family structures.

Black women in Singleton's film, despite a focus on the Black family, are all portrayed as inadequate in some ways.

I do not want to fall into a debate around positive and negative portrayals since I recognise that such a debate places artistic production in a binary space that always produces what Kobena Mercer has called "the burden of representation." Mercer argues that Black artistic production is displayed so little that each time it is put on show we begin to debate issues of representation and issues of positive and negative imagery.<sup>4</sup> While Mercer's point is well taken, I believe that given some circumstances those questions (around representation) become important. The role of women in our communities can not be simply re-written and displayed as artistic expression presenting the artist's views when the depictions are such that they can erase hundreds of years of Black women's efforts at keeping the Black family intact.<sup>5</sup> Singleton's construction of the Black female draws on popular notions circulating among many diaspora Black males that make Black women a part of the "problem" and not part of the "solution." As a Black man who was raised and protected by eight Black females, I take particular contention with Singleton's portrayal of Black women which is one that tends to suggest and reinscribe patriarchal ways of relating to women.

Tre's mother gives him up to his father because she can't teach him to be a man. The notion of manhood is never interrogated in the film and the viewer is supposed to know instinctively what manhood is. If we were to closely examine the premise of the film and how women are situated in the movie we see patriarchal blame surfacing. Black women are blamed for not being able to look after and guide their male children and thus by extension are blamed for the family breakdown. Tre's mother is portrayed as a woman committed to her own personal needs. She is completing and completes a Master's degree in the movie and the suggestion that we are left with is that her pursuit of that degree hinders the relationship that she could have had with her son. Singleton draws on a prevailing popular, contemporary stereotype of Black women to create the character of Tre's mother. Black women are apparently (in the United States of America) outnumbering Black men in acquiring post-secondary education. That has led to debates that centre around the ideas that suggest Black women are being alienated from Black men, their community[ies] and that Black women are being played off against Black men by a white supremacist structure and culture. The latter point is important and cannot be easily dismissed as invalid. It must however be interrogated as to where its politics are located and directed — in social justice or a [re]constituted Black patriarchal order. Singleton implicitly alludes to those debates in his portrayal of Tre's mother. The stark contrast of living arrangements between Tre's mother and his father is one moment where we are meant to see the Black woman's mobility at the expense of her Black male children. Also Furious' comment to Tre's mother on why she is always buying her son stuff is meant to locate the Black women's response as one of merely a materialistic approach to the problems and pressures of raising their [male] children. Singleton's approach to Black motherhood is not historically or contemporarily<sup>6</sup> grounded and only serves to reproduce sexism as a means to control Black women's choice and

ambitions by implicitly suggesting that they need to return to the home and take care of their children.

Furthermore, most of the women in the movie are portrayed as being inadequate and ineffective mothers to their children. Doughboy's and Ricky's mother and the female crack addict are two such depictions. This contrast becomes even more evident when the only other woman in the movie with a child, Ricky's partner, is made peripheral to the main themes because the father (Ricky) is there to "help" look after his little boy. There is never any discussion on raising children that takes place between Ricky and his partner. It seems that Singleton is asking us to believe that the father's presence makes the task of child rearing much easier. While that may and should be true it does not necessarily happen and often it is not the case. In fact, Ricky's death comes after his partner must involve his mother in an attempt to get him to go to the store to purchase cornmeal so that she can finish cooking a meal. Singleton once more places women in traditional roles that leave little space for manoeuvring. Male power is such that it takes two women to get Ricky to go, one of them calling on motherhood and the "respect" it usually brings as well as invoking the fact that if his partner did not cook he would not eat.

The Black women in Singleton's movie are not allowed many spaces to radically challenge and resist sexist racist oppression. There are moments in the narrative of the film when the female characters resist and challenge totalising discourses that seek to displace their presence. One such occasion is early in the movie when Tre's mother resists the teacher's racist assumptions about Black women. Also Doughboy's "partner" (She is never named as such and the

4. See Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, "Young Black Males in America: Endangered, Embittered, and Embattled" in *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins (Eds.) (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992). In her essay, Gibbs demonstrates a much more sound analysis of the situation that African-American males find themselves faced with. Her analysis paid close attention to education, governmental policies and economic restructuring as reasons for the exacerbation of problems in neighbourhoods like South Central L.A. Only once in the film does Singleton attempt to throw his net wider in addressing the problems that structure the lives of the residents of the hood and it is in the scene where Furious, Tre and Ricky visit Crompton. The discussion of gentrification, drugs and criminal activity that follows hints at reasons beyond the residents for the problems in the hoods. As well rapper KRS One's "Love's Gonna Get Cha (Material Love)" on the album *Edutainment* (Boogie Down Productions, 1990) also offers a sound explanation in which he asked the question "now tell me what the fuck am I supposed to do?" He addresses the issues of poverty and inadequate education as reasons for much of the crime and resulting violence in the South Central L.A.

5. Kobena Mercer, "The Black Artist and the Burden of Representation." In *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, Rasheed Araeen (Ed.) (London: Kala Press, Spring, No. 10, 1990).

6. See Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Carby provides a reading of early Afro American women novelists that opens up a myriad of ways in which they (Black women in general) participated in all aspects of African-American survival.

7. See Elizabeth Higginbotham, "We Were Never on a Pedestal: Women of Color Continue to Struggle with Poverty, Racism and Sexism" in *Race, Gender and Class: An Anthology*, Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins (Eds.), (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992).

relationship is not a partnership, but the allusion of a relationship of sorts is there.) challenges the males at the barbecue ("why you always calling us 'hoes'? I ain't no 'hoe'") and in another scene she insists on the possibility that God might well be a She. The most important challenge by a female comes from Tre's mother. During her meeting with Furious in a restaurant, she lets him know that taking in and raising his son was no uncommon feat and that women had done it many times before. This is an important moment in the film that is not explored enough and it even seems to have the appearance of being edited into the narrative after some thought. This scene is disruptive of the flow of the film but lack of exploration of the issues raised leaves it as just a fleeting moment in the movie that can be easily dismissed. The scene's importance lies in the chance for the film to place Black motherhood in a historical and contemporary perspective, in particular the economic and political role that Black women have played in reproducing, caring, nurturing and maintaining families, as well as to reposition Black masculinity away from the stereotype that suggests that Black fathers are never around.

WHILE SINGLETON IS INTENT on showing the Black male in a different light from the usual stereotype in mainstream films, his attempt undermines Black women's historical and contemporary role in keeping the Black family intact. The character played by Larry Fishburn is a welcome change for Black males (like myself) who must often sit in cinemas and wonder about the character sketches that are drawn of them/us. This time, the character might be much more "realistic" but the sketch is a limited model for the construction of counterhegemonic Black masculinity.<sup>7</sup> Most of the moments of manhood in the film are forged around violence and violent acts. Those moments are as diverse as Tre's first encounter with violence as his friend shows him the shoot-out scene from the night before, to his father's admission of joining the army and going to Vietnam as indicative of his then false sense of manhood. It should be stated that Furious rejects the army as a place for Black men but does not explicitly denounce the Vietnam war. The movie asks us to live with many contradictions around Black masculinity. While Tre's father attempts to teach him that violence is not an appropriate means to settle disputes, in the burglar scene, his father produces and fires his gun at an intruder. This opens up the questions of 'when is violence acceptable and useful; is it ever useful?' Thus we are faced with the dilemma of how does one maintain a philosophy of non-violence in a violent and threatening situation. Ricky will use the violent game of football as his ticket out of the hood.

Violence is one of the dominant threads that construct masculinity in the film. Masculine identities are forged at and around violent episodes. One of our first encounters with Tre, after the shoot-out scene, is his fight with his friend and classmate. It is this fight and the insinuation from his mother that there have been others that lead to him going to live with his father. It is obvious that Tre comes of age amidst violence and violent acts. The beating of Doughboy is one such act.<sup>8</sup> However, the shooting of Ricky

is one of the important moments of male bonding in the film. Tre and Doughboy demonstrate their grief at their loss quite openly at the scene of the shooting. The moments that follow are important for interrogating notions of Black masculinity. Tre's attempts at going after the killers and the argument with his father are typical of the seeming contradictory nature of Singleton's construction of Black masculinity. Furious' attempt to convince Tre that violence does not make him a man and that going after the assailants will not solve the problem only serves to call to mind his (Furious) earlier encounter with the burglar. Singleton ironically and complexly demonstrates the problem of trying to maintain a non-violent philosophy in a violent environment. From the outset the movie offered limited approaches to dealing with violence and constructed violence as an element of masculinity, thus a binarism (between violent and non-violent) develops that must be played out by Tre in his attempt to avenge Ricky's death. Tre's eventual decision not to take part in the revenge killing is an important one but it took time for him to reach that decision because other alternatives that did not privilege violence were not a part of his everyday life.

Teaching Tre to be a man is one of the main threads that hold the movie together. The kind of man that Tre will eventually become is dependent upon what his father knows. I can not resist asking who taught Furious about manliness and fatherhood? Furious puts Tre through a number of routines as a child that are supposed to create a sense of individuality in him.<sup>9</sup> Leadership is one of the main tenets of Furious' training for Tre. One of the questions that surfaces as a result of this notion of leadership is who will he (Tre) lead? Will it be patriarchal leadership of women (Brandi, played by Nia Pepples), or will Tre be recast in the role his father<sup>10</sup> takes on in his (Furious) speech on gentrification as a political community activist or will it be the role that Tre takes on after Ricky is murdered and he tells Doughboy to meet him in a few minutes as he loads his father's gun? Leadership for what, who and why is never really explored nor is it developed as a counterhegemonic action of significant importance to the Black community[ies] that transcends gender roles and practices.

Gender roles as taught and learnt from Furious and as representative of Black masculinity are limited for Tre. After the barbecue held for Doughboy's release from prison, Tre brings home some food for his father and in the course of conversation between father and son, Furious comments that Doughboy's mother could have had a "chance" with him if she did not "talk so much." That comment sets up a scene of heterosexual, male bonding. The bonding has a precursor in the film. In the scene on the beach with Tre as a pre-teen, his father questions him on his knowledge of sex. Tre gives an understandingly simplistic, childish answer and his father comments that "any fool can have a child, but it takes a real man to raise his [children]." Sex and sexuality are defined in the film as heterosexual and other ways of sexually and sensually knowing the world are absent and are never explored. The barbecue food and hair cutting scenes are examples of the construction of Black masculinity as inherently heterosexual. Tre's manufacture of a story

describing his sexual encounter with a young woman is one example of Singleton's limited portrayal of Black manhood. Despite the appearance of an attempt to undo Tre's lie in the following scene through his confession to Ricky that he lied to his father for the first time, it does not work in the film. The emphasis is placed on the lie to the father and not on the heterosexual/masculinist reasons why the lie was created. Nonetheless, there is a moment in that scene where the vulnerability of masculinity and its attendant "pressures" are laid bare in Tre's acknowledgement that fear has prevented him from engaging in sexual intercourse. As well this is one of the moments where Black women are resistant to male power because Tre informs us that Brandi is also unwilling to engage in intercourse regardless of the situation. In another scene that follows, Singleton gives us this information directly from Brandi and it comes across as powerful testimony of Black women's agency. However these subversive and disruptive moments in both the narrative and the film do not last for long.

It is shortly after that Brandi and Tre engage in sexual intercourse. While it appears that Brandi is clear about her decision to have sexual intercourse with Tre, the context of that intercourse remains troubling to me. The actions of Tre and Brandi come at the end of two scenes that supposedly portray examples of the dangers that Black manhood and masculinity are faced with. The first scene is the shooting that takes place in Crenshaw and the second is the police harassment of Tre and Ricky as they flee Crenshaw. In the latter scene, Tre is visibly shaken and when he arrives at Brandi's home, his fear and frustration finally explode and he struggles to regain his "manhood" that was taken away from him by another Black man (the police.) The scene in Brandi's house is one that has moments for Black masculinity to be portrayed as oppositional to the usual popular cinematic conventions of men falling into the arms of women to/for "support" in their quest to regain "masculinity" after some traumatic event. However Singleton reproduces the formula and Tre and Brandi engage in sexual intercourse as a means for Tre to regain and assert his masculinity. This scene is exacerbated by Tre's suggestion to Brandi that marriage in college might not be a bad thing. Thus the patriarchal, heterosexual formula for Black family life is constituted right before our eyes. Other forms of Black families remain absent from the film. At the end of the film we are told that Brandi is at the college across the way from Tre's school reinforcing this image of the heterosexual union as the only avenue for expressing Black masculinity and maintaining the Black family.

Patriarchal and heterosexual ways of seeing the world abound in the film. There are moments when the undoing of these seems evident but then the following scene or scenes further ahead unwrite those moments of possibility. Tre's support of Doughboy as evidence that he still has a brother after the revenge shooting is one example of this. In this scene, Black male bonding takes place at a level that was not yet seen in the movie. Despite the arrival of this bonding through violent actions, the intimacy and urgency is such that it transcends the circumstances that produced it. The image of Black males hugging, bonding and speaking

about their feelings is one that remains powerful for the message that it holds/sends. It is partly powerful because of its scarcity in popular film. For a moment no one is "punk or faggot" and the need to be a "real man" is firmly set aside. The physical and verbal abuse is replaced with an out-pouring of love and caring that is evident on both Tre's and Doughboy's part. But then we are told that two weeks later Doughboy is murdered. Is Singleton suggesting that love between Black males can not be sustained? While I see the motive behind Doughboy's death as maintaining the narrative of the film (Black male chances of violent death), his death at that time also raises questions around love and unity among Black males. This, as well, is one of those times (mentioned earlier) that moments of possibility in the film are unwritten or subverted. Thus their possibility to act as "real critique" of popular notions of Black masculinity are somewhat undermined by the narrative of the film.

Throughout the film, moments of Black male tenderness are framed within contradictory circumstances. While it is clear that Singleton is trying in some instances to demonstrate the enormity of peer pressure to conform to "hyper-masculine conduct,"<sup>11</sup> even in his "alternative" similar images and connections are not clearly interrogated. Early

7. Much of the recent "progressive" literature that addresses questions of masculinity does not discuss "race" as an important constituent of social constructions of masculinity. Texts like the edited collection by Michael Kaufman, *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power and Change*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) fleetingly discuss race and how it operates in the construction of white masculinity as power and privilege. Other texts like David Jackson's *Unmasking Masculinity: A Critical Autobiography* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990) do not even mention race as a part of the formation of identity; and Brian Pronger's *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex* (Toronto, The University of Toronto Press, 1990) once again fleetingly mentions "race." However the collection of writings edited by Essex Hemphill, *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), offers a multiplicity of ways of looking at Black masculinity from a gay perspective with many points of entrance for heterosexual Black men to think and rethink their notions of masculinity.

8. This is a significant moment in the film because it is after this that Doughboy goes to jail for the first time and when we next see him he is the "new" neighbourhood tough guy.

9. Audre Lorde's (1984) "Manchild: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response," in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984), demonstrates that individuality and leadership are not necessarily the important outcome of raising your child but rather the kinds of decisions the child learns to make. She writes that after discussing the essay "Manchild" with her son Jonathan she asked him what were the benefits and the negatives of her parenting, and in response to the negative, he replied that he got ridicule "from some kids with straight parents." When asked if from his peers he replied, "oh no... my peers know better. I mean other kids" (p. 80). What Lorde points out through Jonathan's quote is that the child learned to make choices that did not produce friendships that could not live with difference and were free of negative peer pressure.

10. See Cameron Bailey's article in *Now Magazine* (July 11-17, 1991), "Fishburn's intense energy changes urban black tragedy," in which Bailey suggests that Fishburn (*Furious*) plays the "race man" in *Boyz n' the Hood* and Spike Lee's *School Daze*.

11. See Marlon Riggs, "Black macho revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! queen" in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, Essex Hemphill (Ed.), Boston, Alyson Publications, 1991. The second quotation that opens this essay is from the above essay by Riggs.

in the film the young Ricky has his football taken from him by some of the "boyz in the hood." As his brother Doughboy is beaten for attempting to regain the ball and Ricky and his friends give up on recovering the ball, one of the tough guys, in a moment of kindness, decides to return it. However he can not just return the ball which he then held but he must pass it to another guy whom he can then bully and force into returning the ball. In that way, his tough masculine character remains intact. It is those depictions of Black manhood and masculinity that I find perplexing to the extent that they do not clearly problematise masculine constructs but shift our (viewers) focus to receiving the ball back and other moments like going off to the store despite having no money. As well, in the two scenes where Tre and his father are emotionally close, they are all encapsulated within other frameworks that make emotional closeness particularly "masculine." In the scene where Furious details the rules of the house to Tre, they both are "pumping iron" as indicators of their "true manhood" to counter the fact that they are discussing matters of a domestic nature ("Naturally" that is not man's work). Secondly, in the hair cutting scene, the immediate insertion of jokes and laughter into their discussion breaks up the opportunity for serious, solemn bonding to take place between father and son on a level that shows an intimacy that is not stereotypically male, i.e., emotionally distant. Those moments in the movie speak to the inability of the film to act as a vehicle for Black males to think about and rethink lived and dominant representations of Black masculinity and masculinity in general. At the same time, those moments remain important for their unorthodox portrayals (Furious and Tre) of Black men in popular contemporary film. On the other hand, the hair cutting scene is an excellent translation of Black signifying onto film that Singleton structures into the movie giving it a distinctly Black aesthetic sound and atmosphere.

SINGLETON'S FILM IS STILL an important one despite its limited approach to Black masculinity, Black family organisation and Black on Black violence. In the essay "Reconstructing Black Masculinity,"<sup>12</sup> hooks argues for a Black masculinity that has much more fluidity to it. She suggests and theorizes other possible ways that Black males might have and continue to resist white supremacist patriarchy. Drawing on memories from her childhood Black community, hooks suggests that men who refused to be a part of the status quo and "who shunned ready made patriarchy and invented themselves" (p. 88) are ignored in a focus on the emasculated Black man. While I think that part of the intent of Singleton's film was to undo the notion of the emasculated Black man, it was not accomplished in the movie.

However, the film does succeed in a number of other areas that are important to contemporary depictions of young Black men in particular. At a time in Western societies when young Black males are pathologised<sup>13</sup> as criminal and dangerous, Tre makes the decision to go off to college, to resist the endemic violence in his community and to be committed to one woman (Brandi). While those might

seem like "small" things that can/should be taken for granted, they represent attempts to Black youth<sup>14</sup> to take active responsibility for their lives at a time of increasing politically conservative and even fascist oppression that singles them out as public enemy number one. Singleton's alternatives might not be available to all youth, given class, gender and sexual orientation, but the portrayal of positive alternatives is a step that circumvents an outcome of criminality and perpetual joblessness as the future that lies ahead for Black youth.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, Singleton's indictment of racism and its everyday occurrences works well. The seemingly peripheral nature of white people to the film demonstrates how white supremacy works to organise and make invisible its power. The silence of the white policeman in the harassment scene of Tre and Ricky speaks volumes. His silence is characteristic of how white supremacy maintains and organises the relations of Black people one to another. The Black policeman's self hatred and internalised racism is evidence of white power gone "right" and a masculinity that is only functional in a mode of dominate, control and violate. Those modes are inevitable outcomes of oppressive organisational systems. Those oppressive systems must be challenged and Singleton's film offers such a challenge. It is a partial challenge to one dimensional stereotypical roles of Black males on film; it is a challenge to white supremacy by laying bare its implications in the mayhem of the hood; and it is a challenge to Black males to play a more meaningful role in their community[ies] that I believe should be way beyond simply rearing children to encompassing and assessing our roles as patriarchs and attempting to undo those roles in our community[ies].

*I would like to thank Handel Kashope Wright for suggesting the title of this essay. As well, I would like to thank Handel, Sandra Awang and Kasia Rukszo for commenting on an earlier draft of this essay. However, I would like to say that the flaws, errors and weaknesses are all mine*

13. This essay is in bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

14. See Errol Lawrence, "In the abundance of water the fool is thirsty: sociology and black pathology (*The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, London: Hutchinson University Library and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982), in which Lawrence demonstrates how the state and everyday racist ideologies pathologise Black youth by attributing criminality, poverty, education and social class as their main defining characteristics with little grounding of those characteristics as outcomes of policy making and racist practices.

15. There is a discourse in the public sphere that tends to equate black youth with young Black male. Here I use the term[s] Black youth to refer to both males and females. It is true that the problems which face Black males and females are different at certain junctures; nonetheless the two groups live their lives interlocked within a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist system that operates on a basis of hierarchies.

16. I want to make clear that the opportunities to circumvent criminality, joblessness and other social inequalities lie with the state apparatus to provide, enact and practice policies and programs that address the marginalisation of Black youth. These policies must allow for agency on the part of youth to make significant decisions about their lives. I am in no way attempting to displace racism and conservative political policies and agendas as structuring the outcome of numerous Black youths' lives.

## Minbo no Onna

by Robin Wood

When *Minbo* opened in Japan the yakuza acknowledged its audacity by paying a very special tribute to Juzo Itami: they waited for him outside his home and slashed his face. He should bear the scar as a badge of honour: no American director has so far dared to make a comparable film about the Mafia. The *Godfather* films, for example, distinguished as they are, say, Yes, the Mafia do terrible things, but that's forced on them because they're trapped in a system, and look how they suffer! — we have to love them really. *Goodfellas*, predictably, is much tougher, but its final effect is not entirely dissimilar because it offers us no perspective from outside the world it represents. Itami presents the yakuza as thoroughly stupid, brutish and ridiculous, and ends his film with what amounts to a direct appeal to the Japanese public to put a stop to their activities. (My concern here — like, one assumes, that of Itami's assailants — is not with what might constitute a 'true' or 'fair' portrayal, but with political efficacy).

Itami is a brilliant and courageous filmmaker, and *Minbo* is exciting, exhilarating, at times touching, and very funny. In the Japanese context it must be quite inspirational, and the American public if they can make the imaginative leap (not a very great one) of substituting 'Mafia' for 'yakuza,' might well find it inspirational also. It will surely receive

North American distribution, so this is not the time to attempt a detailed account of it. The film is so strong, as far as it goes, that one is tempted to merely salute it and pass on. On the other hand, it eloquently confirms one's sense of Itami's ideological limitations, and in the context of *CineAction* it is on them that the emphasis must be placed, albeit reluctantly.

When I first saw *The Funeral* I mistook Itami for an authentically radical filmmaker — not in any direct political/polemical sense, but in the sense that the Buñuel of *Viridiana* was radical, refusing to produce any solution to the film's problematic from within the existing social system. *Tampopo* (which still seems to be, quite understandably, most people's favourite Itami movie — its comic inventiveness and play with narrative expectations are irresistible) also evokes Buñuel, but the Buñuel of *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* rather than the Buñuel of *Viridiana*. And, even so, *Tampopo* is decidedly less disturbing: it lacks any equivalent for *Discreet Charm's* 'black holes,' the dark spaces of the Oedipal nightmares in which the social surface is repeatedly swallowed up. It might be more apt to describe Itami as a sort of heterosexual Japanese Almodovar — more disciplined, but increasingly more predictable.

Itami's wife, the unfailingly delightful Nobuko Miyamoto, who appears in all his films, becomes increasingly dominant as his career progresses: the two *Taxing Woman* films and *Minbo* are virtually star vehicles for her. In *Tampopo* (often referred to as the first 'noodles' Western), she is the helpless and beleaguered female whose life is transformed by the enigmatic, charismatic stranger who rides into town, teaches her how to make the perfect noodles, and rides out again (in his truck): the joke is too clear for anyone to take the film as reinforcing (as opposed to parodying) cinematic male/female stereotypes. *A Taxing*

The 'Woman of Minbo' (Nobuko Miyamoto) confronts a yakuza thug.



The 'Woman of Minbo' discovers a committed ally in the initially timid bellboy (Takehiro Murata, who also plays the younger of the lovers in *Okoge*).



*Woman* and *A Taxing Woman's Return* are more directly and explicitly feminist — within firmly circumscribed bounds. The 'taxing woman' is a wonderful, invigorating characterization: strong, intelligent, instantly seeing through every hypocrisy of the powerful and unscrupulous capitalists she investigates, dauntless and heroic, the equal of any man: on a certain level, an admirable role model. Yet she works for the government, and what she exposes is not the patriarchal-capitalist establishment but its abuses and corruptions. The films do not, I think, effectively confront the obvious incongruity of this, although the second one (which, unlike most people, I prefer) is much darker in tone and might be read as expressing Itami's growing uneasiness with his project. Taken as 'feminist' statements, I don't think the films can be argued to go far beyond the work of Hawks.

*Minbo* essentially repeats Miyamoto's 'taxing woman' character, now clearly established as her persona, though here she faces even more formidable adversaries and ends (although once again triumphant) with a punishment that strikingly anticipates Itami's in real life. From my (admittedly external and superficial) understanding of their role in Japanese culture, I gather that the relationship between the yakuza and the Establishment is as complex and intricate as the obvious American equivalent, i.e., there is complicity and mutual dependence — the recognition that each *needs* the other — as well as mutual distrust and surface hostility. To mount a wholehearted assault on the yakuza, therefore, that is entirely uncritical of established authority and ends simply by reaffirming it, must be read as either naive or disingenuous. I hope I have sufficiently signalled my pleasure in, and admiration for, Itami's films. At the same time it needs to be said that it now seems very unlikely that his work will ever meet my initial (perhaps misguided) expectations. Like that of many potentially subversive comic artists (Tati, for example), it remains

trapped within the bounds of a decent progressive liberalism, with all the unresolved contradictions that implies.

'Minbo' is a current slang word that has no exact equivalent in English; it refers to the complex process of extortion practised by the yakuza. The title *Minbo No Onna* (literally 'Woman of Extortion Rackets') relates back to Itami's earlier film *Marusa No Onna* (*A Taxing Woman*, literally 'Woman of Tax Evasion').

## Okoge

by Robin Wood

*Okoge*, directed by Takehiro Nakajima, opens with one of the most delightful credit sequences in the cinema. A respectable bourgeois mother, on vacation at a seaside resort, leads her children down to a fairly crowded beach. They select a space, spread out their towels, open the picnic basket — whereupon, looking around, she suddenly realizes that they are entirely surrounded by naked or semi-naked gay men behaving with varying degrees of what respectable bourgeois people regard as impropriety; not wishing to go into inconvenient explanations, she pretends not to notice. The film is a real audience-pleaser — and not just for gays: at least, the obviously mixed audience at the festival screening loved it, applauding wholeheartedly at the finale where the nasty heterosexuals get soundly beaten by a whole gaggle of drag queens. I think liberal

heterosexual audiences (of the kind who attend film festivals) are absolutely ready for films that tell them how nice gay people are (they can even accept quite erotic scenes of gay lovemaking), and how unpleasant it is when nasty straight people mistreat or exploit them. What they don't particularly want to know is that gay people have problems just as serious as their own — it makes it difficult to enjoy them as quaint spectacle.

Not that the characters in *Okoge* don't have serious problems, but they are not of the kind that cannot be accommodated by the liberal mentality without undue pain or guilt: the problems arising, for example, from the fact that the elder of the film's male lovers cannot (until the delirious climax) reveal his homosexuality to his business associates without forfeiting his prestigious position in the firm. A social issue, rather than a psychological or existential one, and liberals can always encompass social issues, provided they don't appear to demand more than cosmetic alterations to the culture.

It's a very nice movie, although about half an hour too long: the lengthy middle section, where the problems raise their ugly heads, everything goes wrong, and the mode shifts from comedy to melodrama, needed far tighter structuring. No doubt, given the apparent backwardness of Japan on gay issues, the film seems far more audacious there than here, but in a Western context it's quite audacious enough (if one thinks in terms of reaching audiences beyond the gay community): it goes far beyond any Hollywood movie that explicitly treats gay themes and relationships. I laughed and cried my way through it, with a lot of pleasure.

'Okoge' means, roughly, 'fag hag.' The title is clearly ironic, as the film's 'okoge' has nothing in common with the popular image that brutal term conjures up: she is the teenage daughter of the woman at the beach, who instantly falls in love with gay men (and specifically one gay couple, shown in the still) as representatives of liberation and nonconformity. As a presence, she is irresistibly seductive in her bright-eyed idealism; she is also the film's major problem. How wonderful for a gay couple (one in the closet, and married) to meet an adoring and complicit teenage woman with an apartment of her own! But the relationship among the three is very charming, very *disarming*: one supposes that she gets *something* out of it. The price of this, on the other hand, is that the film suppresses any indication whatever of the young woman's sexual identity. She was abused as a child, so is turned off heterosexual men; on the other hand, there is no suggestion that she is a lesbian. Neither is she shown as having any problems of her own, or distress, or any sense of an absence: the only sexual satisfaction the film allows her is purely vicarious, that of facilitating the amorous encounters of the two men. She sleeps, eventually, with a man, and bears his child — but only because the younger of her two adopted gays, after the breakup of the initial relationship, falls in love with him, and (although he frequents gay bars,) he claims to be heterosexual, so that the male relationship can never be consummated (he is the film's ultimate shit, of its range of heterosexual competitors for that honour). She sleeps with him, without pleasure and not at all in competition, because she identifies so completely with the man who is in love with him and can't have him.

*Okoge*, the opening sequence





Still for *Daddy and the Muscle Academy*. A drawing by Tom of Finland.

Much in the film is quite lovely: the young woman's sense of freedom in gay company; the ending, with the younger gay man accepting her and her child (by the lover he could never have), the three going off to build a life together: the ideal new family with (one speculates) the first non-Oedipal child, whose parents will not oppress it, abuse it or force it into the 'Oedipal trajectory' of 'correct' socialization. But there are penalties.

First, some may object to the total absence from the film of decent heterosexual males. This — but perhaps I am prejudiced — doesn't bother me (any more than it does in, for example *Celine and Julie Go Boating*). It is certainly true, as the saying goes, that 'some of my best friends are heterosexual males,' and I don't like to see them unappreciated; but they are in a small minority. I have come to the conclusion, from long experience both within and without university life, that approximately one in ten

heterosexual males are bearable, and approximately one in twenty (the committed feminists) are really terrific. There are fewer than ten heterosexual males in *Okoge*, so why complain?

What is far more worrying is the film's treatment of women. There is of course the wonderful central character — but, captivating though she is, and in some respects an admirable role model, her function in the film is simply to be supportive of gay men, and she is permitted no real life outside that (the film's good-hearted naïveté is both the source of its pleasure and its most serious deficiency). All the other women are, to varying degrees, obnoxious. Worst of all is the stereotypical portrayal of the outraged and vindictive wife of the older, closeted lover: the film permits us no understanding as to *why* she might be outraged and vindictive, after many years of being deceived, betrayed, and used as a 'cover.' Admittedly, they are all heterosexual women contained within the patriarchal 'discourse' and fully complicit with it. But this scarcely excuses the film's failure to attempt any analysis of their position.

## Lesbians and Gays Make the Movies

by Richard Lippe

Kay Armatage and David Overbey, two long standing programmers for the Festival of Festivals, have regularly included lesbian and gay themed films in their selections. But, this year, there was a particularly rich and varied collection of films dealing with lesbians and gays and their concerns. These films, at present fashionably referred to as queer films, range widely in mode from narrative realist filmmaking to the documentary, the experimental and the avant-garde; similarly, the subject matter and origins of these works is highly diverse.

Unfortunately, given programme scheduling conflicts, my teaching commitments and a lack of stamina, I saw only a small portion of the some thirty lesbian and gay films screened. The films I most regretted missing include Laurie Lynd's *The Fairy Who Didn't Want to Be a Fairy Anymore* (Canada), Takehiro Nakajima's *Okoge* (Japan) (see Robin Wood's review of the film in these pages), Roeland Kerbosch's *For a Lost Soldier* (Netherlands); and, although I didn't have high expectations, given a previous exposure to his work, *Chain Letters*, 1985, I wanted to see Mark Rappaport's *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (USA) because of an interest in both Hudson's screen persona and, more generally, the concept of the star image.

I was grateful to see the films I did. In the following



Richard Loeb/Daniel Schlachet is interrogated in Tom Kalin's *Swoon*

paragraphs, I offer my responses to four films. Each of these films was provocative, raising issues that include the interrelation of style and content and the problematic concern of subjectivity, pleasure and gratification. I want to qualify my evaluations of these films in that the perceptions are based on a single viewing; it isn't so much that I mistrust my initial reactions, but I think a second viewing may have revealed more.

Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (USA) has been extensively written about in both the mainstream and alternative press and is currently in commercial distribution. As many reviewers have said, the film is very ambitious stylistically and sets out to be controversial in its presentation of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb who were convicted in 1924 of murdering an eight-year-old boy. Unlike Hollywood's treatment of the material (Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, 1949, and Richard Fleischer's *Compulsion*, 1959), Kalin's film is explicit about the young men's homosexual desires; furthermore, he suggests that Leopold and Loeb, when tried for the killing, were judged in a prejudicial manner. The two

men, in addition to arousing homophobic responses because of their relationship, were victimized because they were Jewish and intellectuals. Kalin places a strong emphasis on the degree to which homophobia shaped the contemporary thinking about the Leopold and Loeb scandal. In the midst of a realist courtroom sequence, Kalin includes a shot of Leopold and Loeb lying together in an embrace in a bed which has been given centre position within the courtroom; the implication of the 'nonrealist' image is that the men are equally on trial because of their sexual orientation.

While I don't doubt that Leopold, Loeb and their behaviour (in one scene with the press, the two men present themselves as dandies) fueled latent prejudices, I question how much Kalin accomplishes in using these characters to point to and document the existence of irrational phobias within our society. Kalin doesn't deny that Leopold and Loeb were murderers; on the other hand, he seems very cautious about exploring what might have caused these two men to perform such a monstrous act. In the early

Richard Loeb/  
Daniel Schlachet  
and Nathan  
Leopold/ Craig  
Chester before the  
murder, in Tom  
Kalin's *Swoon*



sequences of the film, Leopold and Loeb are given somewhat child-like personas; they are boyishly adventurous, playful, petulant in their attitude towards each other and to those around them. Despite their intelligence, sophistication and worldly milieu, the two can be seen as innocents of a sort. Although Kalin provides numerous glimpses of the men's capricious behaviour and the halting development of their sexual relationship, he doesn't develop sufficiently the notion that they can't either fully recognize or accept their sexual attraction to each other. As homosexual desire for them has been associated with the perverse, the deviant, the men begin to see themselves capable of such behaviour in other areas of their lives. In actuality, then, the attraction of the lawless act (the murder) functions as a substitute gratification for their unfulfilled sexual desire. If Kalin is concerned with the psychoanalytic perception that aligns sexual repression and violent behaviour (and I think there is indication that he is — for instance, he parallels the progression of their criminal activity with the men's increasingly erratic behaviour towards each other), he doesn't forcefully articulate the insight. Instead, Kalin concentrates on the notion that the men are martyr-like figures.

*Swoon* is an extremely accomplished film and Kalin is secure in handling his stylistic choices which serve to undercut a realist presentation of the material. The film's

refusal to be readily accessible is reinforced through the rapid cutting in the introductory sequences of the film; the mosaic-like structure produces disorientation and denies the viewer the opportunity to construct a rapport with the characters. Kalin increases the distancing stance by disrupting the recreation of the period setting by having Leopold and Loeb associated with present day artifacts and objects, a copy of *Interview* magazine, a cassette player and head phones, a touchtone telephone. Arguably, I don't see what Kalin gains through using these conventions other than signaling his knowingness and desire to be aligned with post-modern filmmaking.

In an interview published in a local newspaper (*Now*, September 24-30, 1992), Kalin, discussing the film with Ingrid Randoja, says that the intention behind his filmmaking practice is to "...invite multiple readings and to make you want to see the film more than once." I don't think Kalin's somewhat cryptic presentation of his protagonists either provides the rich texture he suggests or obscures his primary concern which is to condemn homophobia and other societal manifestations of bigotry. *Swoon* illustrates that Kalin is a talented filmmaker and the film's political directness on gay oppression is admirable, but ultimately, the film is unsatisfying on both an intellectual and emotional level.

An intriguing element of *Swoon* is a casting choice; I am

thinking of Daniel Schlachet who plays the Richard Loeb character. Kalin's style doesn't allow his actors much opportunity to develop a performance although Craig Chester as Nathan Leopold is given in the film's second half more of a chance to flesh out a characterization. Schlachet is used primarily because of his sensual presence and good looks which evoke Rock Hudson at his most 50s glamorous. Whether or not Kalin used Schlachet intentionally because of his resemblance to Hudson, the casting adds a textural layer that is more fascinating than his overt attempts to produce reflexivity.

*Nitrate Kisses* (USA) is experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer's first documentary and the film is expressly concerned with lesbian and gay representation in print and particularly on film. Hammer's film takes up a number of issues concerning representation including how lesbians and gays were portrayed in the pre-Stonewall decades of this century and what effect these images had on shaping the lives of lesbians and gay men. (As illustrative of these depictions, Hammer uses 50s and 60s sensationalistic paperback covers featuring lesbian-themed material and the gay images are drawn from James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber's film *Lot in Sodom*, 1933.) Hammer offers samples of past images on screen while on the sound track we hear reminiscences from women and men who lived through these times; Hammer counters the past with her own present-day images of lesbians and gays in various degrees of intimacy from a social for elderly lesbians to same-sex couples making love. Although the off-screen voices recollecting the past indicate that there is a lived continuity to the artifacts shown on screen, Hammer's concern is the disjunction between what had been presented in the media and what actual lives were and are about. And, accordingly, she stresses how important it is that lesbians and gays document their personal lives; these recordings are a vital and historical and cultural contribution to the future generations of lesbians and gays. Clearly, Hammer wants the viewer to grasp how essential it is that lesbian and gay culture is shaped by those who have a genuine commitment to homosexuals.

Like Kalin's *Swoon*, which has a documentary-like feel, *Nitrate Kisses* is photographed in black and white and has a grainy, hard-edge look. (In introducing the film to the Toronto audience, Hammer elaborated on the film's title, telling us about the inflammable nitrate film stock used in the earlier days of the cinema. On the nitrate stock, the 'explosive' kissing was done by heterosexuals; in the 90s, she suggests, the explosive kisses on screen will be those of lesbians and gays.) Although Hammer seems to want to film to be relatively relaxed in tone, the attempt is undermined by her almost unrelenting academic attitude. Hammer, in the experimental tradition, employs a highly fragmented structure and the film features such devices as providing no correlation, counterpoint or otherwise, between the on-screen images and the sound-track narration. Additionally, Hammer informs the viewer to the effect that narrative film is to be mistrusted because these works, unlike real-life experiences, are neatly structured

and provide pat resolutions; in the same vein, she cautions that the act of naming or categorizing is to limit and circumscribe an experience. In particular, Hammer's misgivings about the latter practice seem to be somewhat at odds with her documentary filmmaking and archival concerns.

In the present-day footage, Hammer presents three instances of couples making love and these images constitute the most provocative aspect of *Nitrate Kisses*; these sequences are centred respectively on the activities of two elderly lesbians, an interracial gay couple and a pair of young punk-like women. Hammer has chosen admirably subjects who challenge conventional notions of what should be shown and she photographs her subjects without fragmenting their bodies, hence avoids fetishizing them. On the other hand, she makes a distinction between the first two couples and the third; in filming the two young women, Hammer includes herself in the image, having her reflected image seen on a window as she records the women making love.

As a political project, *Nitrate Kisses* is very commendable aligning itself without restraint to lesbian and gay identity; as a film media project, *Nitrate Kisses* raises complex questions about filmic discourses and the privileging of one mode over the others.

Like *Swoon* and *Nitrate Kisses* (both titles are highly enticing), Ilppo Pohjola's *Daddy and the Muscle Academy: A Documentary on the Art, Life and Times of Tom of Finland* (Finland) is concerned with gay history and culture. As a documentary film per se, Pohjola's work is less unconventional than *Nitrate Kisses* but, alternatively, its subject matter is potentially the more controversial. Essentially, as the film's subtitle indicates, *Daddy and the Muscle Academy* validates and celebrates Tom of Finland's gay pornographic drawings. (A drawing by Tom of Finland graces the cover of *CineAction* No. 15 and is used within to illustrate Bryan Bruce's article, "Modern Diseases: Gay Self-Representation in the Age of AIDS.") In contrast, pornography is an area that *Nitrate Kisses* approaches through implication; but, in both films, there is a concern with the documentation of sexual identity, intimacy, pleasure and fantasy and how it becomes meaningful and to whom.

Pohjola's film primarily employs a traditional documentary format including interviews; the interviews with the artist himself are, in fact, one of the film's strengths as he is articulate and very open about his work, its origins and evolution. Tom of Finland has produced a remarkable body of work both as a skillful artist and through the gay fantasy images he has constructed during the last fifty-some years; the works illustrate the interrelation between creativity, pleasure and sex.

In seeing his images on film, I was struck by the extent to which the drawings are inherently filmic — the works inevitably involve narrative and action and reveal a sensitivity to the construction of mise-en-scène. Then, there is a connection between the drawings and mainstream cinema in the male-image types employed. In a number of

the drawings shown in *Daddy and the Muscle Academy*, there is a figure which has a physical presence that is unmistakably modeled on a 'masculine' male movie star who is considered to have a lot of sex appeal — Marlon Brando, Robert Redford, Burt Reynolds; arguably, these very contemporary images of masculine desirability can be seen as deriving in part from the image Clark Gable cultivated in the 30s cinema. Obviously, neither the Hollywood cinema nor Tom of Finland single-handedly provided present day culture with its iconic masculine images. Nevertheless, when looking at drawings done some forty or fifty years ago, it is startling to realize the extent to which Tom of Finland anticipated what has become a mainstream concept of masculine appeal. And, clearly, the masculine image found in the drawings relates to the gay male images popularized in the 70s; to watch a Joe Gage porn film such as *The El Paso Wrecking Co.* is somewhat akin to seeing a series of Tom of Finland's drawings animated.

In the course of an interview, Tom of Finland acknowledges that the initial inspiration behind his work stemmed from his fascination with Nazi/military iconography. His admission isn't to be taken as an endorsement of either Fascism or the military; still, that the images have a fetishistic dimension regarding the empowerment of the masculine male and involve patterns of domination/submission raises complex cultural concerns. In addition to the fact that sadistic-masochistic fantasies pervade our cultural life, it is worth pointing out that his attraction to these heightened images of masculine swagger occurs in a historical period when gay men were thought of as 'sissies' — effeminate, limp-wristed, the dandy; less specifically, the military sanctions male proximity and bonding allowing for images of men working, playing and living together; and the military connects men to regalia, notions of performance and the theatrical without undermining their masculine self-image.

I realize that not every gay person finds Tom of Finland's drawings liberating or sees them as representative of gay fantasy images; but I find his work to be generally witty, sexy and loving, with many of the drawings displaying an underlying gentleness. Tom of Finland celebrates sexual desire and pleasure and he both recognizes and fulfills fantasy needs. And, conceivably, the work, in its total abandon in depicting gay eroticism, offers a challenge to those who argue that gays are acceptable as long as sexual desire stays in the closet. *Daddy and the Muscle Academy* is an important contribution to the documenting of gay history and culture. Pohjola has created an elegant, informative and affirmative film that is a loving tribute to its subject and his work.

Mark Christopher's *The Dead Boys' Club* (USA) is a twenty-five minute fictional narrative that is centred on a young gay man's imaginative response to the legacy the 70s gay community has left; in particular, the film confronts the relationship between that liberating period, AIDS and present day existence. The film's premise is that an

inexperienced and somewhat cautious Midwestern youth visits his dead uncle's lover in New York City and inherits a pair of the recently deceased uncle's shoes which, when put on, transport the youth back into the 70s gay nightlife of discos and orgy rooms. The premise allows Christopher to address several concerns: 1) gay generational bonding; 2) the 70s not simply as a time of promiscuous sex — the film depicts the men's social/physical interaction as a basis of self discovery and a means to build potential friendships; 3) that AIDS fears shouldn't be allowed to defeat contemporary gay men from fulfilling their sexual desires and romantic needs; 4) that sexual confidence and assertiveness is in the present day connected to the practice of safe sex.

Although Christopher's film is perhaps a bit too schematically structured and transparent about its project, the film, nevertheless, is highly appealing and original in its approach to its concerns. In addition to being an ambitious undertaking, *The Dead Boys' Club* has an energy and optimism that are a most welcome addition to a depiction of gays on film or elsewhere. During these times when the AIDS crisis has taken gay culture deeply into areas which are infused with feelings of sadness, frustration and anger, Christopher's film is an unexpected delight.

Mark Christopher is a filmmaker of talent and imagination as *The Dead Boys' Club* shows. I hope the film finds critical and commercial support so that he can move on to a feature length project.

## Autumn Moon

by Florence Jacobowitz

I wonder how kids today will grow up to be.  
And what will become of the kids in the  
future? As our culture fades away, what will  
they remember? Will they be nomadic  
modernists that wander, with no attachments,  
no memories, no dreams?

Clara Law, Director, *Autumn Moon*

*Autumn Moon* is linked, thematically and stylistically, to a group of narratives about youth and urban experience which, in many ways, reached its height in the sixties French New Wave films of directors like Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, but is rooted in the post-war films of Roberto Rossellini. In the closing shots of *Rome: Open City*, the children are left to roam across a war-scarred urban landscape. The image is not liberating, but filled with

tension and apprehension. From what culture, which traditions will they be nurtured? The Second World War demonstrated the impossibility of building upon a culture which could condone and enact premeditatively the atrocities witnessed in Europe and Japan. *Germany Year Zero* ends with the abandoned child committing suicide.

Godard's children of Marx and Coca Cola, who came to life in *Masculin/Feminin* and other films of the sixties, are the logical relations of Rossellini's generation of long post-war youth. In a late capitalist culture, the guidance society offers its youth comes in the form of advertisements and celebrity interviews. Against the backdrop of the Viet Nam war, their concerns revolve around contraception and insipid pop music. Many of Godard's films of this period use Paris as the setting for its alienated disaffected inhabitants (supremely in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*). Late capitalist industrial life is characterized by a sense of loss (the metaphoric use of pinball parlours/cafés and highrise developments ironically termed 'les grands ensembles') and the breakdown of language, conversation and social

interchange. The characters in *Autumn Moon* are the children of IBM and Sony. The setting is the ultimate capital of the industrial, capitalist city, Hong Kong. The need for language has been nullified by the intense isolation manifested in video terminals, computer games and communication. Experience is no longer expressed in terms of human exchange; it is recorded, and thus commodified.

*Autumn Moon*, Granny lights her incense, with Tokio and Wai

*Autumn Moon*, Tokio and Wai meeting at the harbour



Tokio/Masatoshi Nagase, the male protagonist, is a supreme product of his times. He is a Japanese tourist in Hong Kong and records his vision incessantly with his video camera. Most of the perceptions which he records are expressed in terms of their relative value in Hong Kong dollars (his overpriced hotel room, his new shoes, etc.) Tokio meets a young Chinese/Cantonese resident of Hong Kong, a schoolgirl Wai/Li Pui Wai, and they begin to speak (They meet in front of the polluted waters of Victoria Harbour where Tokio is fishing, uselessly. Wai stops to inform him, in her limited English, their only common language, "No fish here.") Their friendship evolves and together they explore the shared experience of growing up as a teenager in an alienating urban environment. Aside from the commonality of their broken English, Tokio and Wai share the familiarity of high tech packaging, from the food they eat (Wai associates McDonalds's nostalgically with her childhood birthdays) to the entertainment offered in the form of TV and video games which they watch and manipulate.

Wai's parents never appear in the film except in a framed portrait on the wall of their apartment. The strategy perfectly underlines their irrelevance to Wai's life. The narrative rationale for their absence is that they are in Canada, paving the way for the family's emigration. The protagonists are emotionally and spiritually alienated from their parents; Wai values the companionship and increasingly, the values of her grandmother. Tokio and Wai slowly learn to appreciate both the grandmother's cooking (it has a specific taste and texture which is authentic) and her ritualized life (the importance placed on feeding a cat or praying to a compact Buddha shrine perched over the fridge). Wai's grandmother, like the world of traditions and rituals she represents, is being left behind literally and metaphorically. The family plan to emigrate without her, and she plans to die in Hong Kong.

The courage that Law's film manifests is in its tender groping for a sense of meaning, of values, of ritual. Unlike so many contemporary works which acknowledge the same problematic tackled in *Autumn Moon*, Law gently allows her protagonists to bypass the easier routes of cynicism or romantic love. Instead Tokio and Wai explore friendship, learn to value 'Granny' in a new way following her illness and hospital stay, and even attempt to appreciate the beauty and mystery of rituals like the festival of lights in autumn, by lighting paper lanterns and setting their candle-lit melon ships afloat. It is hard to describe this without it sounding trite and sentimental, but the film manages to make its points with finesse, delicacy and subtlety. It never speaks condescendingly to its audience, or addresses the viewer with sarcasm. *Autumn Moon* respects the spectator's intelligence through a tone of understatement and an extraordinary visual style. Law uses videotape and film footage thoughtfully, without resorting to vapid trendiness. Tokio's erratic video recordings gain resonance in direct proportion to his awakening consciousness, culminating in

an extraordinary disciplined long-take monologue wherein Granny articulates her wishes and blessings for her family and her yearnings for an appropriate burial site on a hill. Hong Kong is often shot from an aerial point of view or from extreme high angles which give it the look of a surreal moonscape. The film uses colour precisely (particularly cool blues, steel grays and blacks) to underline the extreme mechanization of the social world it inhabits and investigates. This sharply contrasts the soft muted yellows of the natural light which illuminates the dark harvest sky in the film's closing shots.

*Autumn Moon* argues for a re-examination of the validity of a deeply-rooted culture, or the meaning embedded in some traditional structures and rituals and the importance of human interaction, without, as noted, resorting to cynicism. Law's fears for the generations nurtured on the eclectic depersonalized grab-bag which characterizes urban culture and much of contemporary filmmaking should not be dismissed lightly. It is a brave statement to make in the nineties, and beyond that, it comes in the form of a creative and accomplished film.

## The Pool

by Tom Orman

*The Pool: Reflections of the Japanese Internment*, directed by Canadian filmmaker Mark de Valk, premiered at this year's Festival of Festivals in Toronto. The documentary centres on the experiences and writing of Canadian author Joy Kogawa but aspires as well to become the frame of that writing, to provide historical and sociological contexts while at the same time re-presenting, and in some cases re-contextualizing, its aesthetic and political effects. Using personal interviews, dramatic reconstructions and interpretations, as well as extant documentary footage of the concentration camps to which Japanese Canadians were sent and the official propaganda films which accompanied the institution of these camps, *The Pool* "re-reads" Kogawa's novel through her actual experiences and through the recollections of her father.

In *The Pool* it is clear that for Japanese Canadians the traditional family became the most important centre of resistance to the overwhelmingly powerful state apparatus which, during the crucial years leading up to and immediately following the war, alternately fed and threw upon grassroots racism and popular hysteria. Kogawa herself cites a newspaper writer of the day who described the Japanese Canadians as "a stench in the nostrils of the people of Canada." During the war, the internment, and the

dispersal which immediately followed the war (the second and more radical displacement whereby the Canadian government virtually destroyed the possibility of a Japanese-Canadian community), Japanese Canadians were forced to accept their status as "the despised rendered voiceless." Kogawa's writing has been part of the subsequent effort to reclaim that voice, and her first novel, *Obasan*, not only won instant literary recognition in 1981, but became a touchstone for the Japanese redress movement in Canada. *The Pool*, in its turn, positions itself as a careful and sensitive account of her "coming to speech."

Yet what is immediately apparent in *The Pool* is that the family has not entirely cohered as a site of resistance. History and circumstance have tragically intervened, and as a result the film must divide its attention between the author, Joy Kogawa, and her father, Gordon Nakayama, an Anglican minister, detainee, and first-generation Japanese Canadian. The author and the reverend, daughter and father, have struggled against their alienation and abjection more or less separately, under sometimes vastly different conditions and across a seeming abyss of years. Such efforts, especially during the internment, were at first provisional attempts to re-group in order to preserve community, and Reverend Nakayama himself gained permission from the Canadian government to film the work camps to which

Japanese men had been sent. *The Pool* incorporates and juxtaposes this valuable 16mm footage, part of Nakayama's efforts to preserve the tenuous infrastructure of a beleaguered and disintegrating community and assuage the anxieties of the older detainees, with government propaganda footage and with poignant reconstructions of the Japanese dispossession, and especially, of father/daughter partings. Indeed, the traumatic separation of father and daughter becomes, through these reconstructions, the primal moment of the Japanese Canadian diaspora. Though Kogawa's book takes its title from her heroine's aunt, or *obasan*, there is little trace in the film of a first-generation feminine presence, a presence, and an absence, that at once structures and virtually haunts Kogawa's novel. Further, the director's emphasis on Kogawa herself interposes her as the single feminine voice of the internment and of the subsequent redress movement.

Kogawa, on her part, simply refuses to be categorized as a victim: she accepts redress as political empowerment won, in part, by performing what she calls the imaginative exercise of identifying with the victimizer. Further, according to Kogawa, in abjuring victim status Japanese Canadians must nonetheless find common cause with those who continue to be victimized. Although her own story is so rooted in the past, Kogawa's orientation is to the present

#### *The Pool*





*The Pool*

and to the future: her political focus is on maintaining a real and ongoing dialogue between victim and oppressor. In the meantime, eleven years after the publication of Kogawa's first novel, *The Pool* performs the interim function of framing the particular text of *Obasan* within the context of its more immediate effects and aftermath. The film, in part, "proves" the efficacy and validity of this political dialogue and helps to establish and clarify it as an ongoing political practice. *The Pool* is not a coda to Kogawa's *Obasan*, nor does it subsume the previous text; rather, the film allows itself to be co-opted by previous voices and by the larger political effects initiated by its "subjects."

In a film that is *about* voice, a film in which questions of rhetoric and ontology are so intermixed and so crucial, the question of *who* speaks is equally unavoidable. The film's mandate is somehow to elicit the speech of the other, and de Valk, in an effort to minimize his own interventions, tends to restrict his "commentary" to dramatic reenactments. Yet he is not able entirely to efface or disguise his own presence, a presence that is perhaps most clearly manifested by the implicit identifications that structure the film.

De Valk clearly identifies with the struggle to represent,

thus with Kogawa as an artist and with Nakayama as a filmmaker. In Kogawa's account of the internment and its effects, cultural meanings have become embedded, sedimented and calcified within a history of repression and self-denial. *The Pool* sensitively accompanies Kogawa's own excavations of a personal history by echoing and envisioning her metaphors while at the same time maintaining contact with the larger political and historical contexts to which the child is subject and with which the author is later engaged: the struggle to free the personal voice is clearly also the struggle to enunciate at both the artistic and the political level. In order to offset the often heroic self-effacement practised by her parents, Kogawa herself has become the central figure in translating insular, private grieving into a public demand for redress, thus transforming what might otherwise have been private monologue into a focused and public dialogue. The strength of *The Pool* is that it manages to reconstruct this transformation, or rather, to hold to this transformation as the true object of interest, while at the same time capturing the chaotic and tragic dispossession, internment, and dispersal of the Japanese Canadian Community.

# En-gendering the Nation

GERDA, "A GIRL'S OWN STORY"

by Kass Banning

...Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past few centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly die for such limited imaginings.

*Imagined Communities*  
Benedict Anderson

Mrs. Munsinger has blue eyes, carefully shadowed with make-up, heavy black false eyelashes and let it be said — a run in her left stocking...

*Norman Depoe*  
*This Hour Has Seven Days*  
March 1966

Just one year prior to Canada's 1967 Centennial — the rite-of-passage ritual that helped legitimize our status as a modern, more "imagined" nation-state — an alleged "sex and spy" scandal rocked its tenuous foundations: the Gerda Munsinger Affair. Brenda Longfellow's feature *Gerda* excavates this alleged "sex and security" site from a specific perspective, a gendered perspective. Eschewing the objective heights of traditional (née masculinist) historiography, with its attendant faith in the transparency of signs, Longfellow widens the stakes and adopts the methodology of a *new* historicist



Brenda Longfellow's *Gerda*

biographer — self-conscious ambivalence.

Yet *Gerda* is no dowdy docudrama. Part feminist archaeology, part fable, *Gerda* takes its cues from the *real* enigmatic Gerda Munsinger, a femme fatale who, in part, contributed to the prevailing mass media hysteria and distortion, who participated in her own fictionalization. A myriad number of techniques help uncover her mythological construction, while at the same time these eclectic approaches weave a complex and contradictory portrait. The "truth" behind the scandal, whether she was a Soviet spy prying secrets out of unsuspecting Cabinet ministers (Pierre Seigny, the Conservative minister of defence plays the male lead in the scandal) or just, in her own words, "a girl who just wanted to have fun", is never clearly ascertained. To "signify" on the title of Jane Campion's early compelling short, *Gerda* offers a unique "Girl's Own" history.

Laced with irony and driven by intellect, *Gerda* exemplifies feminist historiography at its best. Gerda Munsinger's rise and fall is re-presented through a mélange of postmodern fragments, with historical fact wedded to personal fantasy: radio, television and newsreel footage

(both real and simulated), sampled newspaper headlines, the odd interview, campy, colourful tableaux, and Gerda's own fragmented memories (shot in black and white) punctuate dramatic re-enactments.

An RCMP officer holds the works together, doubling as both chronicler of the Munsinger affair and continuity device. A stand-in for the inexorable drive towards mastery and truth, representing both the law and male desire, his reminiscences kick-start the film. The character's fact-finding zeal, however, gradually betrays an underlying warped fascination with this particular "case" as he obsessively maps Gerda's sexual activities onto her suspected espionage. The most banal everyday occurrences he obtains through surveillance are interpreted as symptoms of guilt. His prize exhibit, a 1952 American Army intelligence report, similarly displays a tendency to conjoin anti-communist hysteria and the dread of women's bodies. His "sentencing" disdain of Munsinger as an "illegal border-crosser" is indeed apposite.

This is admittedly a risky work, one that generally pitches to the head, rather than the heart. Part factual, part analytical, but decidedly fun, there is enough lyricism and enough (strategically placed) visual sumptuousness to carry the idea off. Obviously *Gerda* is no realist depiction of a lived life, as no one singular authenticity is privileged. A lot of folks, however, have a word or two to say about Gerda Munsinger. These competing (occasionally complementary) histories make up the film. At the same time an abiding effort is made to locate Gerda's story within the context of a historical real, her "flashbacks" to the political trauma of post-war Germany are set against contemporary Canadian parliamentary history and the cold war.

This over-arching duelling reference, this radical contradictoriness, informs *Gerda's* every frame. Call it History versus history, or public versus private sphere, this disjunctiveness divides along gender lines which invariably contribute to (and comment on) the instability of narrative (and national) construction. *Gerda's* structure perpetuates such divisionary effects and is blatantly operative from the get-go. The film begins in a multilingual train compartment in un-identified Europe and then cuts to a shot of Gerda looking out the window (ostensibly in Canada), cuts to a black and white subjective "flashback" where a young girl is being chased through a snow-laden forest, and then cuts back to Gerda in the compartment. A shot of a top-secret file follows and the voice over of RCMP officer confidently asserts: "there's no doubt in my mind Gerda Munsinger was a self-admitted Soviet espionage agent, a woman of moral turpitude, addicted to entertaining men in her room, incapable of telling a truthful story". An interview of the real Gerda Munsinger follows, who claims, "I'm a woman, I lived a life like every normal woman does". A series of images of twirling newspapers then occupies the screen and a woman's voice decries "it was a set up". In a few short moments we move from subjective memory to the discourse of the law to embodied "real" testimony (radically negating the previous utterance) to commentary that substantiates the indeterminacy of both statements while alluding to media sensationalism.

Numerous other examples abound that more clearly demonstrate the interplay between nation and sexuality. The commerce between the relational realms of *patrie* and eros irrevocably suggests that relations between men are forged across the bodies of women. Benedict Anderson's insistence that the nation is always conceived as a fraternal "deep horizontal comradeship" is highly articulated in *Gerda*. Indeed, heterosexual sex here is read as libidinal spill-over from excess fraternity at the parliamentary club house. And this heavily symbolic demarcation between the sexes offers a rich source of tongue-in-cheek humour; it also bespeaks the impossibility of an eroticized nationalism (especially a Canadian one). One visually erotically-charged sequence, for example, comprised of shots of co-mingling, fragmented body parts (almost reminiscent of the opening of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*) is matched to the voice of the law. While Gerda and Seigny cavort, the RCMP officer drones on about the Beaumark missile, radar installations, security risks, impending Soviet attacks on North America and the fact that "we were keeping a close watch on all of these activities." The sequence fittingly ends with newsreel footage of a missile ascending.

The "girl stuff" is equally delightful, the dialogue is rife with sexual innuendo, usually at the expense of men. Scenes that feature Berenice (Gerda's "best" friend) and Gerda are especially poignant, yet "fraternal" presence is often within ear-shot. Authoritarian male voices (at one point Diefenbaker's is distinctly present) are cleverly "bled" into the women's diegetic space. This technique is most evident in the powder room sequence and when the pair pay parliament a visit. Yet the relationship between Gerda and Berenice bears more than the surface manifestations of friendship. Berenice's betrayal is just one punishment for not playing by the rules. As definitional other in relation to Canada, Gerda is expelled through a violent act of censorship; she is deported back to Germany in 1961, her image retrieved for scandal-mongering purposes in 1966.

The terms history, memory, and desire (and their inter-relatedness) have become over-used buzz words. Indeed, they have reached clichéd heights in current alternative film circles. Their mere utterance has a stultifying-like effect. (I have heard, on several occasions, individuals speak in hushed tones when reciting the mantra). Such cant is intended to conjure up inordinate measures of depth, significance or "connectedness" inherent in a discussed film work. My intent here is neither to critique films that have successfully negotiated these effects (who would dare to fly in the face of a Walter Benjamin, or dis a *Handsworth Songs* or a *Looking for Langston*) nor to discourage their future utility. The simple evocation of the mantra, solo or in combination, however, cannot adequately situate a given work.

*Gerda* avoids the pitfalls of such commonplace contrivance. The film inexorably demonstrates how memory and desire can condense history into meaningful associations. Political modernism of the sort exemplified in *Gerda* is rare in Canada. Other than John Greyson, Longfellow has few (serious) colleagues. This is unfortunate.

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# FRAMING THE FAMILY

